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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.

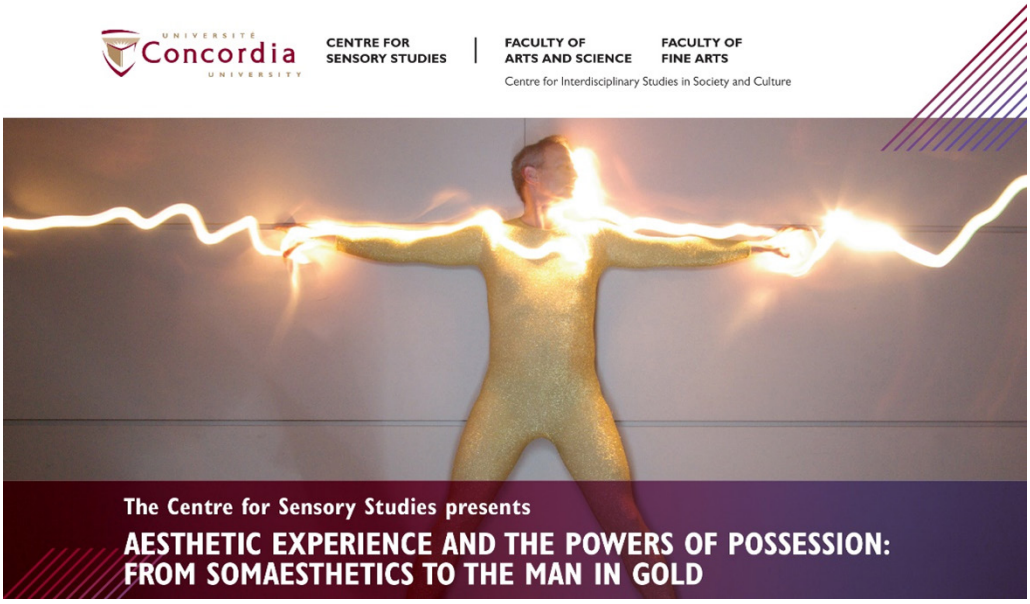

Figure 1: Poster for the Public Lecture delivered by Richard Shusterman at Concordia University in March 2024. Photo credit: Yann Toma.

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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Emilie O'Brien

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Bio

Emilie O'Brien is an interdisciplinary artist-researcher whose creative practice bridges drawing, hand-embroidery, writing and herbalism with the living systems principles of healing justice. Grounded in the belief that embodiment and relationship are essential to mutual thriving, her work critically examines the fascia of connectivity between individual, community, and planetary wellness. Through immersive, process-based techniques - such as bilateral drawing, hand embroidery and collaboration with plants - Emilie explores the relationship between somatic experience, ecology, and systems of care. These practices reflect her interest in emergent systems - those formed not by force, but by relation, rhythm, and response.

Energy Bodies

Energy Bodies traces core and subtle energy flows. Standing with my body at the centre of the textile, extending my arms outward and circling them around back to the midline; I build the topography in layers, revisiting the work many times over several months and seasons, tracing presence and emotional terrain with no analysis required, because the gestural point is to keep moving. Keep breathing. Tracing colours across the whole space, I am brought into rhythm, movement and a sort of creative harmony with myself and the space around me. All of life is made of energy; energy flows through and connects individual and collective bodies throughout the natural world. Our energies touch and feel each other, reach out and move away. Energy Bodies traces the contours of a self that is fluid, connected, motion-filled, intelligent abstraction. It is intended to hang in celebration of this wonder.

bodies at burning man

John F. Sherry, Jr.

John F. Sherry, Jr., Raymond W. and Kenneth G. Herrick Professor of Marketing Emeritus, Mendoza College of Business, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA. ORCID: 0000 0002 5153 5465

Abstract: *I explore the nature of bodies and bodily encounters at the Burning Man Project in the context of art circulation and reception, from the perspective of an anthropologist who is also a poet. My poem probes the interplay of hexis and habit that informs this temporary artworld, focusing both on installed and enacted bodies. Finally, I incorporate complementary retouched field photos to create an enhanced, evocative account of my experience of the sensuous artgift.*

Keywords: *poetry; autoethnography; creativity; ritual; gift giving; vestaval; photography*

Introduction

Every summer, more than 50,000 revelers convene in the Black Rock desert to build, and then to raze, a city of art. The heart of Black Rock City (BRC) is "The Man," a colossal effigy of lumber and neon erected over the course of a week, appreciated by vestavalgoers, and burned to the ground in a blaze of pyrotechnical glory at week's end. Satellite artworks installed on the playa enjoy comparable engagement and sacrificial unmaking. Revelers aestheticize their bodies in a host of ways, and relate to one another in an idiom of gift giving, offering performances of emergent and cognate selves to one another in tens of thousands of acts of artistic immediacy. The vestaval site is somaesthetics incarnate.

As an arts-based consumer researcher, I frequently represent my findings in the form of an ethnographic poem, which interweaves emic concepts and language with my own interpretations. Poetry is well suited to exploring corporeality. Poetry is also a powerful way of representing phenomena, as well as interpretations and understandings of empirical research. I consider instances of making/unmaking, adornment, engagement ritual, embodiment, and related dynamics to develop the poem.

Finally, I have altered some field photographs with PowerPoint filters in a way that translates my experience of radiance, of moving through a vibrant environment pulsating with a host of energies engendering a synesthetic resonance in me. The images – somagrams, if you will – complement the poems and are rendered in the idiom of techno-psychedelic electroluminescence to capture the irreal flickering sensation of auratic materiality.

bodies at burning man

i.

behold the man himself,
flickering to life
at the fusion of *kairos* and *chora*,
effigy around which
other bodies orbit.
colossus of fir reclaimed
and fragrant pine,
limbs waxed and torso
packed with fireworks,
exoskeletal neon cladding
humming to heaven,
aglow in desert night.
the head translucent lattice,
part goalie mask, part shoji,
lodestar by which
pilgrims steer,
until the blaze that razes him
incites the crowd to dance,
to fire walk,
to rut on dusty ground,
to pack cremains for home
to use in healing rites,
to slow descent of vestaval to spectacle,
to coax his rise from ashes
every year.
i conjure ozymandias and xanadu
transfused with transience,
modesty and hope.

Figure 1: Man Restaged

ii.

a grand projective vessel,
stick figure signing touchdown,
hau tower energizing rough encampment,
nomadic hermenauts transfigured,
green man/wicker man/dionysus/christ,
cosmic man/everyman caroming
from revelry to sacrifice, dogma to heresy.
evanescent, perennial, incendiary.
testament to aesthetic practice,
art***work*** over ***art***work
experience over object,
making over having,
giving over selling.
nonument to immediacy.

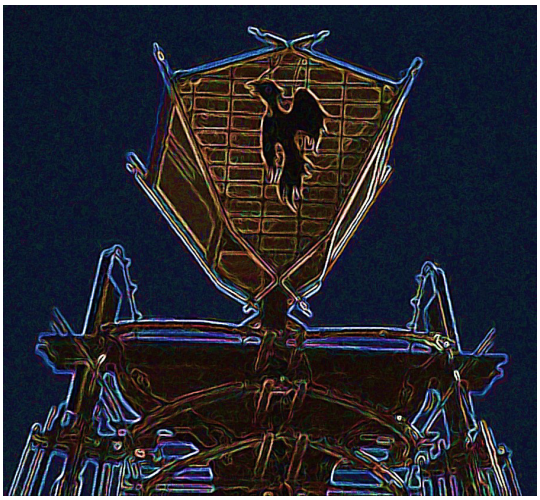

Figure 2: Phoenix Rising

and still,
tattooed on an ankle,
branded on a bicep,
shaved into back hair,
printed on garments,
mounted in jewelry,
captured in calendars,
the image of the man is borne
into the default world
as a talisman
protecting the bearer
from the banal
and the comfortable,
reminder to piss clear
and fuck your burn.

iii.

art is earned in wilderness
by laborers and lookers,
whose sweat evaporates
before it soaks,
where heat exhaustion
steals up unannounced
and clouts you to the ground.
kilned to cracking
by climate and creed,
light enters and escapes
each dusty voyager,
curing artist and aesthete alike.
freed from museums,
galleries and garrets,
staged in stark landscape,
privation whets aesthetic innovation,
happenings and installations
thrum the breath and pulse of art.
the man is art incarnate.
together with his satellites,
he draws pilgrims
like a charm of gorgeous humming birds
iridescence to floral nectar,
under his wing until ecstatic exodus.
and then he burns,
a sacrificial gift
that buys his acolytes
a brief reprieve
from capital.

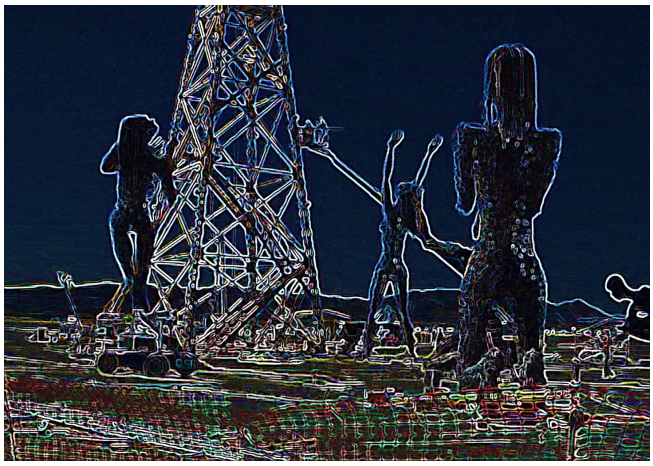

Figure 3: Derrick

iv.

burners wear the desert
in their hair,
mucosa and skin;
it is the foundation
of makeup, make over,
make believe.
desert hitchhikes
to the default world
in wrinkles and creases,
clothing and gear,
a powdery fairy dust
of ferity and flashbacks.
desert grounds the man,
the sojourners,
the installations,
prevents the tripping
of gift circuits
while galvanizing change.
desert, vast and white,
cupped in
color-shifting mountains,
empty after and before,
is no mere stage
or platform for the art –
it is the very bones of ritual
carrying all this effort,
cheering revelers on an endless art crawl,
dancing with dust devils,
back to the source.

Figure 4: Dancer

v.

the desert floor is strewn
with body parts.
giant iron hearts glow red,
fiery tears roll down metallic cheeks,
enormous busts erupt from dusty ground,
great hands grasp for the heavens,
phalli and vulvae populate the playa
as grand sentinels and mutant vehicles,
as far as the eye can see.
and not just parts,
prodigious bodies, too.
solitary studies in emotion,
couples clasped in delicate embrace,

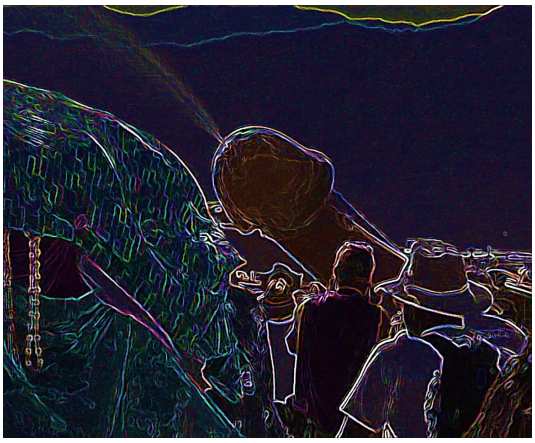

Figure 5: Mystic Misting

tableaux arrayed in modern miracle plays.
exquisite ferric scrollwork
casts each mammoth being
as an airy bearer of light,
vines and tendrils
porous in the morning,
ablaze at night.
my burgin year, brc was a body,
coordinates fixed anatomy and time.
that year i camped at
five o'clock and head,
just off the esplanade
where the procession never stops,
bodies in constant motion.
nomads aching to behold
and to bestow.

vi.

next, catch the carnal characters,
corporeal containers of creative code:
alters and avatars,
fetches and clones,
doppelgängers dancing
in playa pixel dust,
all being and becoming,
enacting selves without script.
transfiguration is a game:
defeat the factory preset.
some struggle to shed
the iron chrysalis of hexis,
some celebrate its summit,
most seek to smuggle
their new bodies
into real life
but most get smothered
in the crossing.
here on the playa, though,
they soar.
they shine.
they proffer selves
to one another,
improv art effects
of incandescent presence,
unboxed, immediate,
a grand homecoming gift
that keeps on giving
even after we depart.

Figure 6: Art Frame

vii.

passeggiata alternates with masque
along the esplanade,
resplendent strollers pausing
to enact identities for each other,
full twirls sometimes
evolving into dance.
reciprocal photography
accelerates these gifts of self.
bodies manifest in countless
and confounding forms.
the hue of nudity defines a spectrum
our tactile vision hungers to embrace:
a sheen of sunscreen coats
taut curve and wrinkle of bare skin,
tattoo and piercing,
cicatrice and brand;
body paint from dayglow to pastel
trowled thick or subtly shimmering
breathes life into rebirthday suits,
a roy g biv of radiant delight.
a spritz of body glitter catches eyes.
the body often doubles as a canvas
bearing messages and symbols
and paintings,
like a hennaed *tromp l'oeil* image
on a gravid belly,
caught in cross-section,
the fetus nestled calmly
on the mother's walkabout.

Figure 7: Raging Bull

viii.

conical straw hats, dust goggles,
tie-dyed union suits,
flame-print shirts and chasubles,
and camelback hydration packs,
the ante to play the game is low,
but cosplayers are harsh critics –
dress to please is *de rigueur*
and improv ingenuity is prized.
think pharaonic headdresses, bedouin robes,
jewelry and parachute pants.
witchdoctor faux leopard and feathers,
tiaras and glow sticks and wings.
there are costumes as easy
as tutus and tits,

Figure 8: Witch Doctor

as lazy as shirt-cockin' codgers,
magnificent merkins and
free-swinging strap-ons,
hot pink fright wigs and
sheer lingerie,
sequins and boas and veils and stilts,
garlands and wrap skirts and chaps,
wedding dresses and business suits,
borat speedos,
hawaiian shirts and leis,
larry's trademark
stetson and guayabera,
storebought and bespoke,
some improvised on-site,
gifts of performance to us all.

ix.

on the playa, the body is fluid.
humans cavort costumed as animals:
rabbits and bears, cats and mice, elephants.
kermit, sponge bob, wonder woman,
the lorax, the grays,
even santa claus roam the playa,
lost shreds of nostalgic fantasy.
legions of angels and devils
question canons
of virtue and vice.
clowns gowned in bdsm gear,
randy pans with naked breasts,
and yahoos with traffic cone cans
remind the revelers of the randomness of mores,
the arbitrariness of anchors,
the porousness of boundaries.
cross-dressing and trans-gendering
pervade the playa.
some flirt with the border
of remaking and releasing,
most snuggle in the bosom
of uncomfortable rethinking.
by week's end,
the cavalcade of body types
and boundless conversation
rejigger norms of beauty:
rovers discover and create,
inhabit and embody
a vibrant kaloscape.

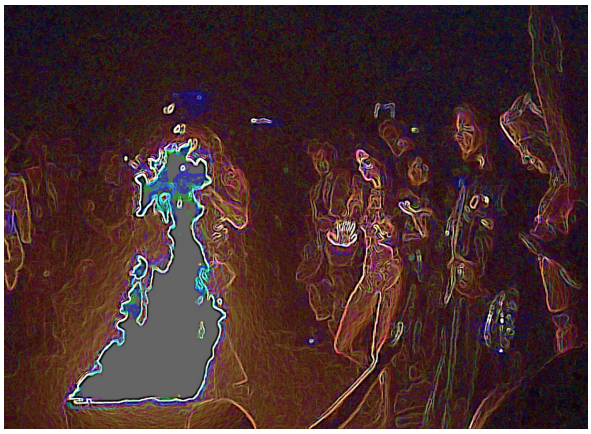

Figure 9: Fire Dance

x.

Figure 10: Climbers

when bodies aren't performing,
they whip across the playa
on battered bikes
to distant installations,
the ratchet sound of dust-choked chains
a *guiro* on the wind.
the art of brc invites engagement,
it calls out to be entered or inscribed,
handled or climbed, played like an instrument,
reconfigured or refined.
immersive unto sensual inundation,
the pilgrims wear art's aura as a many-colored coat,
completing every *oeuvre* by encounter.
at night, drum circles
form around fire barrels,
the pulse and flame
lure dancers to the warmth,
grammar school recorders
are recalled to service
for one last iron man riff,
as drifting throngs freestyle their way
to other venues.
moonlight bright enough
to cast dim silhouettes
in deep playa
sometimes conjures shadow-play
from art-drunk sojourners

xi.

Figure 11: Altered Statesman

default world names convey
unmerited heritage,
hope and false promise,
a template few are able to discard.
sojourners take a playa name
they choose themselves
or gain from fellow travelers
as a gift.
renaming seats
the re-embodied self.
i go by "*komos*" when i burn,
a holy fool
who couches truth in humor.
i treasure "altered statesman,"
a christening by my road dog.

so licensed, i have partied as cernunnos,
as a jester, as a cleric, as a flame.
my psychedelic jesus was a trip.
my luminous motherboard was so well met,
i felt i could have been *la gioconda*.
how unsettling it was to be admired.
bare-assed in the noonday sun was best.
i was born to playa like a champion.
i give away my poems on paste board cards.
out of body
into body,
present and immediate,
juried by the body playatic.
by their art shall we know them.

xii.

even the disclaimer on your ticket
foregrounds your mortality.
and, as with art
some bodies are unmade.
as if by art
despair might be dispelled,
translated so the quick
might feel deliverance from pain.
one body hung for hours,
departed,
mistaken for the bricolage
of installation.
another danced
a metamodern take
on natchez suttee,
rushing flames
and mingling with the man.
each sacrifice ornate austerity,
an awesome offering,
atavistic as the vestaval itself.
best temples,
sanctuaries of shared grief,
shared solemn contemplation,
shared outbursts of catharsis,
console survivors through
art's healing script.
remembrance plaques
of all deceased sojourners
burn with the man.

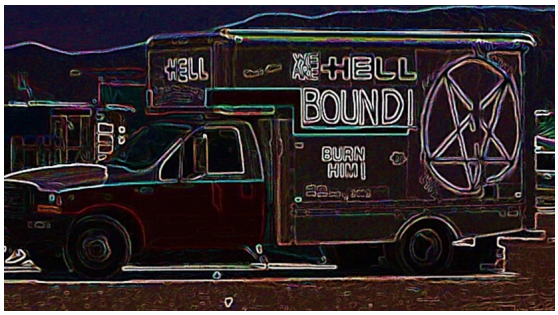

Figure 12: Hell Bound

xiii.

in this vast bewilderness
of reactive choice,
of shifting shapes
and liquid understandings,
of material and carnal reconfigured,
where play rewards
experiment and discovery,
art is the compass sojourners engage.
to be awake, observant,
helping body forth
this feast for the sensorium
and ratify new pathways to wellbeing
is an ecstatic moment.
to make art you re-make the self.
to grok art you re-make the self.
to unmake art, to gift it to the universe,
you introject all parties to the process,
you become
a body of art.
you sacrifice yourself
to this incorporation,
redeem yourself
with every gift received,
and live
as long as circulation lasts.
turn off, tune out, drop in:
the wisdom of the new age desert fathers.
ashes to ashes, dust to dust:
you're the man

Figure 13: Three Graces

Acknowledgements

I thank Robert V. Kozinets for permission to alter his original photograph and include it as Figure 11 ("Altered Statesman"). Also, for blazing the way with his evocative poem, "Desert Pilgrim."

Further Reading on Burning Man Somaesthetics

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The Embodied Experience of Prostration (*chaktsal*): Senses, Aesthetics, and Politics in the Eastern Himalayas

Kei Nagaoka

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Abstract: *This study explores the embodied experience of prostration among Tibetan Buddhists through ethnographic research in the Eastern Himalayas. I extend somaesthetics theory by using a sensory ethnographic approach to analyze the intersubjective relations and bodily sensibility that intersect in the daily experience of prostration. By focusing on the interactions among their senses, aesthetics, and politics, I argue that prostration embodies the Monpa art of living as a creative act that enhances one's good life. This study contributes to discussions of embodiment, sensory anthropology, Tibetan Buddhist studies of the body, and the politics of ritual.*

Keywords: *intersubjectivity, sensory ethnography, embodiment, politics of ritual, Northeast India*

This study explores the embodied experience of Buddhist prostration, called *chaktsal (phyag 'tshal)*, in the daily lives of the Monpa people in Arunachal Pradesh, Northeastern India. [1]Prostration is a devotional practice of touching four parts of the body— head, brow, mouth, and chest, with both hands together, followed by fully lowering the body to the ground, face-down. In Tibetan Buddhist doctrine, this act is a physical gesture of taking refuge in the Buddha, purifying negative karma, and accumulating merit called *sonam (bsod nams)*. Asian physical practices such as meditation, zazen, and yoga have spread to Europe and the United States, becoming popular worldwide as forms of exercise and methods for physical and mental well-being. In contrast, *chaktsal* is practiced mostly by people in Tibet, the Himalayas, and Mongolia, where they serve as religious purification rituals within their local contexts. Practitioners purify their karma and accumulate merit through daily practice with the body, speech, and mind in prostration through physical movements, reciting mantras, and imagining the Buddha.

Prostration is often practiced when people visit monasteries or during Buddhist rituals at home or in villages, monasteries, or sacred places. Many people practice prostration as part of their daily routines in the Buddhist altar rooms of their homes. Although prostration is a well-known physical movement among local people, few studies have focused on the techniques

1 Tibetan terms are rendered with phonetic transcription, followed by the transliteration of the standard Wylie system at first use (Wylie, 1959).

and experiences of prostration itself. While many scholars have discussed the tantric ritual performances and healing practices by monks, shamans, oracles, and practitioners of Tibetan medicine (or Sowa Rigpa) called *amchi (am chi)*, little attention has been paid to the daily practice of lay people who repeat prostrations at home. When I lived with the Monpa people and practiced prostrations with them, I gradually learned that the interplay of senses, feelings, and experiences of prostration varied depending on the context.

This study analyses how the physical act of prostration constitutes a diverse experience intertwined with the senses, aesthetics, and politics of the local people, expanding Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics perspective by drawing on a sensory ethnographic approach. Through ethnographic research focusing on the physical acts and bodily sensibilities of prostration, I argue that prostration is not just a representation of submission or asceticism, but rather embodies the creative art of living a good life.

This research was based on intermittent fieldwork conducted in Tawang District, Arunachal Pradesh, from 2010 to 2016. My research interests lie in examining the diverse practices surrounding illness and treatment among the Monpa people. While my research was not initially focused on prostration, I performed an abbreviated half-body prostration practice when visiting monasteries or participating in rituals, adapting to local customs.[2] As I gradually made more Monpa friends and began performing both the half and full versions of prostrations daily with them at homestays and at friends' houses, I started experiencing the sensations brought on by prostration movements. This was distinct from the trance-like states experienced in rituals, where one might dream or travel to another world. It was a sensation and emotion generated by the movements themselves. At the same time, I began to wonder what prostration felt and meant to the friends performing it beside me, and why they chose to continue this practice daily. This article discusses the daily prostration practices at home of two women, Sangmo and Nima, whom I met locally, and the prostration practices of ritual participants in the public space of monasteries through participant observation and open-ended interviews conducted in Tibetan, Hindi, and Monpa.

1. Prostration and Somaesthetics

Previous studies have analyzed prostration in relation to the *nyungne* ritual among Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling, India (Zivkovic, 2013) and the religious life of Tibetan women in Qinghai Province, China (Fitzgerald, 2020), though only ever marginally. These studies critique text-centered analyses, focusing instead on the uncomfortable muscular exertion involved when participants in the *nyungne* ritual or training program prostrate themselves hundreds or thousands of times. They discuss asceticism and the understanding of others' suffering through physical pain as well as the embodiment of the ritual founder's experience in the past (Fitzgerald, 2020; Zivkovic, 2013). However, the people I came to know do not always experience painful prostration. Pain-free prostrations, repeated only a few times, are also frequently practiced. Hence, perspectives focused solely on pain cannot fully capture the experience of prostration. For the Monpa people, prostration is an art through which they engage positively with life via their bodily movements. Understanding this experience requires analyzing not only Buddhist or ritual doctrines but also their relationship to bodily sensations and aesthetic values. With reference to Shusterman's somaesthetics, this study defines the Monpa people's aesthetics as practices, consciousness, emotions, and experiences which center on living a good life that

2 The half-body prostration is refraining from total extension; one kneels taking the head to the floor before rising into a standing posture (Zivkovic, 2013: 53).

encompasses various values rooted in bodily sensations.

Shusterman defines somaesthetics as "the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning" (Shusterman, 1999: 302). Noting the absence of the body in aesthetics and philosophy, Shusterman states that the purpose of somaesthetics is, first, to return to the original meaning of aesthetics as sense perception; and second, to revive interest in philosophy as an art of living, keyed to cultivating wisdom regarding how to live a good life in both theory and practice (Shusterman, 1997, 2007, 2012, 2020). His somaesthetics combines the body (soma) as a sentient subjectivity with aesthetics, with an emphasis on self-improvement through bodily discipline using analytical, practical, and pragmatic approaches. While his somaesthetics was proposed as a comprehensive field linking diverse studies on the body and was not confined to any specific aesthetic or method, it is nevertheless characterized by its particular focus on self-improvement through physical training and cultivating bodily consciousness. Building on John Dewey's (1958) discussion of aesthetics in everyday experience as the interaction between the biological body and the environment, Shusterman also emphasizes the socio-political aspects of the body discussed by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Foucault, 1977, 1978). Shusterman analyses and discusses practices concerning the relationship between the coding of the body by political power and aesthetic values, the creation of alternative aesthetic values that transcend this, and the relationship between aesthetic values and social norms or morality. A central question in his somaesthetics is how the improvement of bodily movements alters people's emotions, sensations, and thoughts; how the body, through such actions, becomes extended into objects or embedded within social and political contexts; and, how this experience transforms bodily consciousness (Shusterman, 2020).

Somaesthetics can prove helpful with respect to analyzing the experience of prostration within the interplay of the body, aesthetics, and politics. However, a tension exists between Shusterman's concept of self-improvement and the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of the self. Shusterman's somaesthetics emphasizes the construction of an ideal or better self through discipline and training. By contrast, prostration in Tibetan Buddhism, while an act of improvement in terms of purifying karma and accumulating merit, ultimately aims for liberation from self-attachment. As prostration is a practice oriented toward self-effacement, it is problematic to discuss the aesthetics of self-liberation in prostration practice within a subjectivist framework. To overcome this tension, it is necessary to expand the theory of somaesthetics by referring to discussions of intersubjectivity, the body in Tibetan Buddhism, and sensory ethnography. As will be shown, in Tibetan Buddhism, the self is understood in relational terms rather than as will or as project, and in place of creative self-fashioning, the emphasis is on effacement.

2. Sensory Ethnography of Permeable Body

Michael Jackson argues that the self and the other are a product of intersubjective engagement. Jackson conceptualizes intersubjectivity as a mode of being in the world that encompasses social relations between human beings, ancestors, spirits, collective representations, and material things (Jackson, 1998). For his part, Thomas Csordas criticized the discourse- and symbol-centered approach in anthropology, and offered the notion of embodiment as a paradigm for research in their place. He characterizes the latter as an "indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and the mode of presence and engagement in the world" (Csordas, 1993: 135). It incorporates "somatic modes of attention" that are "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others"

(1993: 138). According to this approach, self can be "diffused with other persons and things in a unitary socio mythic domain" through the intersubjective process (Csordas, 1994: 7).[3]

Anthropological studies on the body in Tibetan Buddhism have discussed subtle and permeable bodies using an intersubjective approach (Samuel & Johnston eds., 2013; Zivkovic, 2014a). For example, Geoffrey Samuel conceptualizes the subtle body in Buddhist Tantras as a fluid body possessing "centers" (*cakra*), "channels" (*nāḍī*), and flows of "energy" (*prāṇa*), which differs from the Western dualistic understanding of body and mind (Samuel, 1989; Samuel, 2013).[4] Discussing tantric lineages grounded in centuries of experience in the use of alternate states of consciousness and body-mind techniques within the subtle body, he suggests that transformations in consciousness and transformation in society should be seen as aspects of a single process, not reducible to one another. For her part, Tanya Zivkovic analyzed the sensory experiences of Buddhist rituals and the use of lamas' relics, highlighting the intersubjective relationship and embodiment between lamas, deities, and ritual participants (Zivkovic, 2010, 2013, 2014b). Zivkovic states that the self is not considered a bounded and fixed entity, and its ritual life includes intersubjective reciprocity, which "pass between people, deities, and objects in, at times, very fluid ways" (Zivkovic, 2014a: 100).

Regarding the body within such intersubjective relationships, Robert Desjarlais employs a sensory ethnographic approach to focus on the relationship between embodied experiences of illness and healing and aesthetics among the Yolmo people of Nepal (Desjarlais, 1992). Desjarlais states regarding illness which is understood locally as involving "soul loss" and shamanic healing rituals to reunite soul and body, it is important not only to analyze how meaning is produced through discourse and symbols, but also to explore how local people experience illness through bodily sensibility and aesthetics. According to him, sensibility (defined as "more the visceral sense of a way of being") and aesthetic values are interrelated, and combine to generate the embodied experiences of health and illness (Desjarlais, 1992: 151). He argues that aesthetic values such as harmony, balance, control, presence, purity, and karma among the Yolmo people become embodied as soul loss—accompanied by feelings of sorrow and pain—when one or more of these qualities are lacking due to the tensions people face in political contexts like diaspora and tourism. Shamanic rituals visualize and verbalize these emotions by restoring aesthetic deficits through ritual procedures. Desjarlais's discussion of the relationship between body, sensation, and aesthetics is crucial for addressing the embodied experiences of prostration using an intersubjective approach. His series of sensory ethnographies, which address the experiences of aging and mourning alongside illness, focus on suffering (Desjarlais, 1991, 2000, 2003). Through ethnographic research on prostration, this study combines Shusterman's somesthetics with Desjarlais's sensory ethnography to explore embodied experiences related to a broad range of human emotions and sensibilities such as joy, hope, guilt, anxiety, and fear, and not only the feeling of pain.

Furthermore, this study focuses on the multisensory aspects of touch and sensorial politics of ritual. Research in sensory anthropology has brought to light the historicity and sociality of the sense of touch and how it is constitutive of communication with social others and spirits in addition to engaging sensibilities about skin, texture, and warmth of both people and/or things (Classen, 2012; Classen ed., 2005; Le Breton, 2017). The sense of touch also overlaps with other senses such as taste, speech and sound, sight, and smell through the multisensory experiences within different contexts (Howes, 2019). In what follows, I describe my own haptic sensations

3 For a discussion of the phenomenological approach in anthropology, see Desjarlais & Throop (2010).

4 The letters in brackets are Sanskrit spellings.

during repeated prostration and how sensibilities of touch intertwined with words and sight among the Monpa. An additional focus in what follows concerns the politics of ritual, including pilgrimage rituals. Anthropological studies on pilgrimage highlight that pilgrimage practices influence social movements, borders, identities, and markets beyond religious phenomena, emphasizing how pilgrimage interacts with politics and economics (Coleman, 2021; Coleman & Eade eds., 2018). When Monpas practice prostration, their bodies are embedded within the context of Himalayan border politics and the Buddhist revival (discussed in the final section of this article). Therefore, I examine how their experience of prostration and their aesthetics become linked to norms and territoriality.

Arunachal Pradesh is a disputed border region between India and China in the eastern Himalayas, and is inhabited by ethnic groups with more than 100 different languages and customs. India effectively controls Arunachal Pradesh and classifies the populations into 26 scheduled tribes according to administrative status categories (Mayilvaganan ed., 2020). Most inhabitants of the state, who originally practiced nature worship (known as *Donyi Polo*), converted to Hinduism or Christianity and now practice a combination of both ritual traditions. Approximately 10% of the inhabitants are Buddhists, including Tibetan Buddhists (Mahayana) in the western part of the state and Myanmar and Thai Buddhists (Theravada) in the eastern part (Census 2011). The Monpa people living in the Tawang district of the state are Tibetan Buddhists and they distinguish themselves from other non-Buddhist ethnic groups called *gitu* in Monpa. In Tawang, Monpa comprise approximately 70% of the total population of 49,977, with the remaining 30% consisting of Indian officials, soldiers, and teachers from other states as well as merchants and day laborers from India, Nepal, and Bhutan, and refugees from Tibet (Census 2011). Tawang was strongly influenced by neighboring Tibet from the 17th century to the mid-20th century (Norbu, 2008). However, India effectively acquired controlled over Tawang in 1951. When the Sino-Indian border dispute broke out in 1962, Tawang became a battleground between Chinese and Indian troops, along with Ladakh in the western Himalayas (Guyot-Réchard, 2017; Mayilvaganan ed., 2020). This border conflict led the Indian government to seek to reconstitute Tawang as a border barrier, and defence-oriented development schemes, such as the construction of military facilities and roads, began in earnest (Gohain, 2019, 2020). After their interaction with Tibet was cut off by the border closure, the lives of the Monpa people were more strongly influenced by Indian politics and economics. As the government's militarization of the Tawang region progressed, the Buddhist revival movement began in the 1990s, expanding into the regions known as the Mon region, including the Tawang and West Kameng districts (Gohain, 2024; Nagaoka, 2021). The Buddhist revival emphasized the preservation and promotion of Monpa's Buddhist culture, along with economic and educational development. Alongside various social activities, this movement stimulated consciousness of Monpa culture, Buddhist rituals, and the practice of prostration.

3. Touching the Floor

I was staying with Sangmo (a woman in her 60s) in Urgeling Village. Sangmo had the habit of burning incense in Buddhist altar rooms and outdoors early in the morning, reciting mantras after breakfast and dinner, and performing full-body prostrations at night. Sangmo lived with her husband, her third daughter, her third daughter's 9-year-old son, and a young female relative in a concrete house that they had built several years earlier. Her third daughter's Monpa husband, an Indian Army soldier, was absent as he lived at the military base. Next to their current residence stood the traditional wooden house they had previously lived in, referred to as the "old house."

Despite having a splendid Buddhist altar room in the current house, Sangmo deliberately went to the old house every night with a flashlight to perform prostrations.

When I started staying at her home, I went with her to the old house to prostrate for the first time. On the way, I asked Sangmo, "Why do you always prostrate in the old house when there is a nice Buddhist altar room in the new house?" She replied. "The concrete floor is very cold and hard. It hurts when I kneel." I thought maybe she could just lay a rug down on the hard floor, but I did not say anything and entered the old house. This space had almost become a storage locker, with only one small Buddhist painting on the wall. When Sangmo pointed to the wooden floor and said, "I've been doing prostrations here all along," I looked and was surprised to see that only that part of the floor was sunken and smoothly curved into the shape of her feet. The years of pressing her feet down on the same spot gradually deformed the wooden floor into a footprint. To me, that wooden indentation seemed to embody Sangmo's intense desire to live a good life. In the Monpa tradition, such footprints in wood evoke images of sacred footprints or handprints left by high lamas at sacred sites, which are formed by their powerful supernatural abilities. Sangmo gazed at the imprint with joy. After sweeping the floor with a broom, she stood directly on the floor.

We performed both the half and full versions of the prostration approximately 30 times each. Until then, I was accustomed to performing half-body prostrations three times as part of the monastery visit ritual, but I had never performed the full-body version. When Sangmo first taught me the full version, I had to consciously think about when and how to move my hands and body, which resulted in awkward movements. However, as I continued prostrating with Sangmo every night, my body gradually adapted to this full-body movement, and the clumsy motions transformed into smoother ones. As I repeated the customary movements at a regular rhythm, my awareness came to focus on my breath and bodily motion. The smoothness of movements resulted in a sense of comfort and joy. My body would begin to sweat slightly. My hands and body repeatedly touched the smooth surface of the wooden floor, transferring heat from my body. I felt that the floor and my body were synchronized and shared the same warmth. Sangmo breathing beside me and my own breathing naturally fell into the same rhythm and moved in unison. Unlike trance experiences involving some kind of vision, the sensation of joy brought about by the repeated full-body prostrations consisted, for me, in the rhythm, warmth, and breathing generated by the smooth movement itself. It was a feeling of becoming one with the house's space, synchronized with my surroundings, less a sense of "I am moving" and more a sense of becoming "part of the movement itself."

Through my own sensory experience, I finally understood why Sangmo spoke of the "cold and hard" texture when explaining why she doesn't perform full-body prostrations on concrete floors. This sensation is less likely to occur on concrete floors or carpeted floors. Concrete floors, which conduct heat less readily than wood, remain "cold" no matter how many times you prostrate yourself, keeping the body and floor separate. When placing your knees on the floor or sliding your whole body forward to touch the floor, concrete feels "hard" and is prone to causing pain compared to the softness of a wooden floor. Conversely, carpeted floors often feel warmer than their own, and their overly soft surfaces make it difficult for the body and floor to move in unison, hindering smooth motion. In fact, the preferred surface for practicing prostrations is usually wooden, not only at Sangmo's old house, but also in homes and monasteries where prostration is practiced. When prostration is performed outdoors at sacred sites, it is performed on smooth earth or a wooden board the size of an adult's entire body, which is placed there. Sangmo never skipped prostration, although she might have adjusted its form or number based on the condition of her knees. For her, the practice of prostration was less an ascetic hardship

and more of an experience of joy. This joy encompasses the gratitude of being born with a human body capable of prostration, the joy of purifying karma and accumulating merit, the delight of touching her own footprints on the wooden floor, and the sheer pleasure derived from the fluid motion of prostration itself.

4. Sensibility and Aesthetics of Generosity

When I was still not accustomed to the full-body prostration motion, I could not keep up with Sangmo's regular movements and fell behind. This created an awkward moment. When Sangmo finished prostrating first, she waited for me to finish and said with a worried expression, "You should get up from the floor as quickly as possible." She told me that keeping my hands on the floor too long would cause me to "be reborn as a *yida (yi dwags)* in the next life." *Yida* refers to hungry ghosts. Startled, I stared at the floor, imagining a scene of an invisible yida wandering about. For the Monpa people, the floor is the world where *yidas* dwell, and touching it with the hands or the whole body creates a sense of physical contact with the *yidas*' bodies. The smooth motion of prostration includes the swift act of rising soon after the body is extended on the floor. For Sangmo, the experience of touching the floor evokes not only joy and comfort but also a sense of unease—the fear that one's body might synchronize with and be influenced by hungry ghosts.

Hungry ghosts exist in one of six realms where people are reborn in the next life: gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings (Zivkovic, 2013: 49). Transmigration across realms depends on a being's actions in their current life and their consequences or karma (Obeyesekere, 2006: 1-2). Hungry ghosts are believed to inhabit the lower spaces beneath human feet. Similar to other Tibetan Buddhists, the Monpa spatial conception holds that heavenly realms are inhabited by higher deities, earthly realms by humans and animals, underground or aquatic realms by serpent deities called *lū (klu)* and underworld deities. Lower spirits, such as hungry ghosts and evil spirits, are thought to wander the lower spaces beneath the earth and rivers. When humans bring impurities and violate the boundaries between different spaces, they incur illnesses and misfortune from gods and spirits. The image of a hungry ghost is one of an emaciated body with a distended belly. It is believed that stingy people who refused to share food or drink with others in their previous lives would be reborn as hungry ghosts. When hungry ghosts attempt to consume food or drink, they burn away at their mouths, leaving them perpetually starved. When humans walk and spit on the ground, many hungry ghosts gather to obtain water from the spit. For Monpa, touching the floor or placing objects on it causes anxiety about crossing the boundary between the human world and the world of hungry ghosts and entering into contact with them. Therefore, placing Buddhist scriptures or other books directly on the floor is considered to place wisdom and knowledge in the world of hungry ghosts–a disrespectful and sinful act (negative karma). Furthermore, being called stingy by others implicitly carries the meaning "you will be reborn as a hungry ghost," making it one of the most dishonorable things a person can do.[5]

The emaciated body of the hungry ghost is thought to have resulted from a lack of generosity. Physically touching that hungry ghost body creates anxiety: "Perhaps I myself lack generosity, and because of that, I might be reborn as a hungry ghost in the next life," Sangmo mused. For Sangmo, prostration was linked to this anxiety, possibly influenced by hungry ghosts, which

5 For the Monpa, the bodies of humans and hungry ghosts permeate each other. When one loses appetite due to stomach pain from conditions like gastritis, a ritual is performed to satisfy the hunger of hungry ghosts by preparing and offering food to them. Abdominal pain is seen as a state where, influenced by hungry ghosts, one becomes unable to eat food, just like a hungry ghost. It is believed that by the hungry ghost consuming the food through the ritual, the sick person themselves can then eat again. In the ritual, the boundary between the sick person's body and the hungry ghost's body becomes blurred and permeates.

served to heighten her attention to performing acts of generosity. For example, Sangmo fed birds before prostration. A bird feeder was set up on the path between the new and old houses, and whenever Sangmo passed on her way to prostrate, she always placed rice in the feeder. Furthermore, Sangmo never ate chicken, saying, "Birds that kill insects to eat are impure." I thought she disliked birds, so when I saw Sangmo placing rice on the feeder, I wondered why she would feed creatures she disliked. When I asked Sangmo why she fed the birds, she replied, "I thought that if I gave the birds rice, their hunger might be satisfied, and perhaps the number of insects killed by birds might decrease a little." Feeding birds is an act of generosity. It not only satisfies the birds' hunger but also saves insect lives, reduces the birds' sins, and accumulates merit. Hence, Sangmo combines the act of prostration with the act of giving food. This is an extreme form of other-awareness and care, one which crosses species boundaries.

When practicing prostration, Sangmo's body is not in a one-on-one relationship with the Buddha to which she prostrates. By touching the floor, she connects not only with the Buddha, but also hungry ghosts, and the space of the house. Furthermore, through the act of giving food, which is related to generosity, she connects with birds and insects. Prostration evokes sensations of joy and comfort, but also brings conscious awareness of physical contact with hungry ghosts, potentially stirring unease about displaying a lack of generosity. By combining prostration with the act of giving food, an act of generosity, Sangmo addresses and mollifies this unease. In this practice, Sangmo's body interpenetrates or permeates with and transforms into multiple beings.

5. Sensibility and Aesthetics of Diligence

Nima (a woman in her 50s), living in the city center, struggled to perform her daily ritual of full-body prostration because of an old wrist injury. I met Nima at a Tibetan medicine clinic where she received acupuncture treatment two or three times a month to alleviate her wrist pain. When I first saw her at the clinic, I noticed a large lump on her wrist. One month later, it had shrunk considerably. Delighted, Nima invited the *amchi* (a Tibetan medicine practitioner) and me to her home, where she treated us to a feast of homemade dishes. Since then, Nima and I have become friends and I often visit her house. The wrist injury occurred about ten years ago when she slipped and fell on wet stairs outside her home, the day after it rained. Nima said that her wrist and limb swelled and hurt, so I asked her, "Did you go to the hospital then?" She replied, "No. I was worried about the swelling, but I was afraid that the doctor might say I needed surgery, so I did not go." According to Nima, the aforementioned lump later formed on her wrist, which began to hurt when carrying heavy objects or on rainy days. She sought treatment from folk healers twice, but that did not cure her. Recently, wrist pain had made it difficult to properly perform daily prostrations. Nima had never visited a Tibetan medicine clinic before, but hearing rumors that acupuncture was now offered there, she mustered the courage to go there.

Nima made it her daily routine to spend long hours in the evening in the prayer room, reciting sutras and performing full-body prostrations. Many Monpa people recite the four-syllable mantra of Avalokiteshvara, "Om Mani Padme Hum," before performing prostrations. However, Nima does not use this simple four-syllable phrase. Instead, she opened a small booklet printed with the Tibetan sutras and chanted them aloud. Hers was not the fluent recitation of a specially trained monk or nun. Though Nima carefully pronounced each word in the scripture, she often stumbled over them. Nima gave me a shy smile and said, "I still can't read it as well as a monk. But before, I could not read Tibetan at all." Here it should be explained that due to government policies following increased militarization of the region, the younger and middle generations of Monpas began to receive Hindi education in schools. Consequently, except for

those with Tibetan relatives, most could not speak, read, or write Tibetan, the official language, before the border closure. Watching Nima diligently read the sutra booklet, I asked, "How did you learn Tibetan?" She replied that a Tibetan language class had started in the neighborhood community house a few years back, and she attended weekly sessions to learn Tibetan reading and writing. The sutra booklet she used during her prostrations was distributed by a monk who taught Tibetan classes. Nima was very determined to improve her daily chanting and prostration practices by learning Tibetan and undergoing Tibetan medical acupuncture.

For Nima, the experience of prostration is deeply connected to feelings of hope and guilt. Nima lived with her husband, second son, and Assamese housekeeper. Nima's second son, in his twenties, had an intellectual disability since birth and struggled to speak properly. A young man of the same age and a relative living nearby occasionally visited Nima's home to help the second son and take him out. Nima told me, "When my son was born, the umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck. Because of that, he could not breathe properly." Nima believed that her son had lost the inborn sense of speech due to this mishap, and that the mishap was itself attributable to her own negative karma.

When he was a child, Nima took her son to various hospitals in Indian cities to see doctors. However, every doctor told her that they could not cure his disability. Nima then started taking her son on pilgrimages to Buddhist holy sites in India and Nepal. She felt guilty that her karma might have robbed her son of the power of speech. The practice of prostration and reciting mantras from sutras fostered a sense of hope that, by purifying her karma, her son might be able to overcome his disability and speak like others.

In Tibetan Buddhism, mantras (as the words of gods and Buddhas) possess the power to purify sins and heal illnesses and are something that can be physically sensed (Czaja, 2020). For the Monpas, rather than fully comprehending the meaning of a mantra, devotees prioritize hearing its sound to connect directly to its power. By vocalizing the mantra, its sacred power is conveyed through the medium of breath or wind, known as *lung (rlung)*. This power is then transferred to ritual implements, pills, or the bodies of participants during the ritual (Gerke, 2012; Gentry, 2016; Nagaoka, 2022; Zivkovic, 2013). When a monk recites a mantra during a ritual, his *lung* (breath) is believed to carry the mantra's power to the ears and bodies of the participants, who can then absorb the power of the sacred words through their skin. In empowerment rituals called *wang (dbang)*, the power of mantras is transferred by high lamas or monks onto specific ritual objects. The high lama places these objects directly on each participant's head, transmitting the power of the mantra to them through touch as well as sound.

For Nima, both prostration and reciting mantras were crucial to enabling her son to regain speech. Her physical actions of touching and speaking are linked to hope, bringing change not only to herself but also to her son's body, as merit and purifying power permeate or flow between their bodies. At such times, failing to recite the sutras precisely in Tibetan or not performing full prostrations with the entire body may provoke feelings of guilt, because such missteps suggest a lack of diligence. This heightens her awareness of diligence, awakens her consciousness of the effort involved in learning Tibetan and receiving Tibetan medical treatment, and leads to her actions for physical improvement aimed at performing more appropriate prostrations and reciting mantras.

6. Sensibility and Aesthetics of Honesty

Against the backdrop of the Buddhist revival, ritual ceremonies were revived in various monasteries that had previously fallen into disrepair, and new rituals were performed. As the

number of ceremonies increased, people gained more opportunities to prostrate themselves in public ritual spaces. It is believed that the benefits (merit and purity) gained from prostration can be shared with others or transferred to monasteries by counting the number of times one's body touches the ground and communicating that number to the recipient. Typically, when entering a monastery room housing a Buddha statue, people perform simplified prostrations three times. They then approach the statue, place offerings such as a white silk scarf called *khata (kha btags)* and banknotes along with incense and then touch their forehead on the pedestal at the statue's feet while offering prayers. In contrast, during some special ceremonies, people perform full-body prostrations dozens, or even hundreds, of times before reporting the count to a monk. The monks record their names and the number of prostrations, and through this process, the benefits of their prostrations are tabulated.

How does simply verbally stating the number of times one prostrates and touches the floor to another person transform those benefits into an offering? This can be understood from the perspective of the intertwined senses of speech and touch. Prostration is the muscular movement that accumulates merit and purifies negative karma. The merit generated by prostration is proportional to the number of times the physical movement is repeated. By verbally stating the number of prostrations performed for the monastery, the *lung* (breath) of speech carries benefits and transfers them to the monastery. Thus, people can dedicate the benefits of a mantra by verbally stating the number of times they have recited it. The dedication of the merits of prostrations or mantras is a virtuous act that enhances the purity of the monastery by offering the merits and purity gained through a practitioner's own efforts. It is believed that people will accumulate more merit through this act.

The dedication of prostration merits at monasteries relates to feelings of closeness and fear as well as the aesthetics of honesty. Rather than counting their own prostrations alone, people prefer to count each other's prostrations together with family members or friends. This act of mutually counting prostrations fosters feelings of closeness and trust among individuals. However, they also fear committing mistakes or improper acts before the deities and Buddhas, and thus often tend to report fewer number of prostrations to the monks than their family or friends count. For example, during the Tibetan New Year of 2016, I attended the Monlam Chenmo ceremony with Pema (a woman in her 30s) and counted her prostrations. Pema told the monk a number several dozen times less than I had counted, and she also told me to report a lower number than she had done to the monk. I asked Pema, "Why do you tell the monk such a much lower number than you actually did, even though you prostrated many times?" She replied, "If we mistakenly tell the monk a number higher than the actual count, the gods and Buddhas might think we are lying and deceiving them."

To avoid such difficulties, it is better to state a lower number. When attending ceremonies with the aforementioned Sangmo, Nima, or other friends, they also declared fewer number of prostrations than they performed, dedicating merit to the monastery. In spaces surrounded by venerable Buddhist statues and paintings of guardian deities, people feel the gazes of the gods and Buddhas ever so keenly. They feared that they might act insincerely. If one mistakenly states a higher number of prostrations than were actually performed, the gods and Buddhas may perceive it as a lie born from the selfish desire to gain more merit than others. Such lies constitute evil deeds that lead to the accumulation of sins. The act of counting prostrations for offering is associated with the fear of committing an act deemed a lie before the deities. Guided by their aesthetic honesty, Monpa people carefully understate the number of prostrations that offer merit. Through this practice of offering, each prostrate's physical act expands into a monastery, enhancing its purity and sacred power.

Prostration in Monpa is an intense relational act. Depending on the location and situation, the act of touching the ground is combined with other actions to diversify the experience of prostration. It engages with various emotions—joy, hope, closeness, anxiety, guilt, and fear—intertwined with the sensations of touch, words, and gaze, alongside the aesthetic values of generosity, diligence, and honesty. These are the embodied experiences of the Monpa people striving to live a good life.

Figure 1. People repeating prostrations and a girl counting the numbers of her mother's prostrations (The picture was taken by the author)

7. Embodiment as Emplacement

The Monpa people became embedded within a political context marked by tensions between militarization and Buddhist revival, increasingly subject to newly established norms and moral values. As the Indian government advanced the militarization of Arunachal Pradesh, development projects in Monpa-inhabited areas prioritized national defense over resident livelihoods. For example, military facilities and roads were built on land formerly used by Monpa for pasture and farming. Moreover, Hindi has become the official language in schools and government offices, and Indian national holidays have become public holidays. Officials, military personnel, teachers, merchants from India, and construction workers from Nepal began flowing into Tawang. The Monpa, who constituted the vast majority of Tawang's population, encountered large numbers of non-Buddhist outsiders for the first time during this militarization. Hindu, Islamic, and Christian religious facilities were built around the central town. Since the 2010s, tourism has also developed apace, bringing in many Indian tourists during Indian holidays. Diverse values from the outside were thus introduced to Tawang, impacting the lives of the Monpa people.

The Buddhist revival movement was initiated by Monpa monks who returned from Tibetan monasteries in South India. It expanded in the 1990s across the two districts where Monpas reside—Tawang and West Kameng—promoting the protection and development of Buddhist culture among the Monpas by designating these areas as "the land of Mon" *(Monyul)*.[6] The

6 Unlike Tawang, where the Monpas have constituted the majority of the local population, West Kameng is historically home to various ethnic

Buddhist revival created specific norms concerning culture, language, and medicine. Activists emphasized the importance of Buddhism and the Tibetan language in *Monyul* culture. The revival peaked in the 2000s, when the Monpa spiritual leader, the reincarnated monk Tsona Gontse Rinpoche, became a politician, and another politician, Dorjee Khandu, was appointed as the first Monpa Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh.

Political movements demanding *Monyul*'s autonomy have also emerged. Tibetan language education began in public schools in Monpa-inhabited areas, and Tibetan literacy classes for adults were held in various locations. Similarly, activists emphasized Tibetan medicine as a part of *Monyul* Buddhist culture. *Amchi* (Tibetan medicine practitioners) were increasingly expected to fulfill social roles beyond treating patients, such as participating in rituals alongside high lamas as embodiments of *Monyul* culture and giving lectures (Nagaoka, 2021). Following the deaths of Tsona Gontse Rinpoche and the Prime Minister in the 2010s, the political movement demanding autonomy declined. However, many NGOs established by activists continue social activities aimed at the Buddhist revival. This Buddhist revival sought not only to preserve *Monyul* culture but also to present norms for people to live well as Monpa, by ascribing moral value to Buddhism, the Tibetan language, and Tibetan medicine. The aforementioned actions of Nima to improve her Tibetan language skills and access to Tibetan medicine, along with the frequent offering of the benefits of prostrations during monastery rituals, are deeply connected to these new norms.

Alongside the creation of new norms through the Buddhist revival, the practice of prostration by the Monpa has become a political expression of living as a Buddhist minority in Arunachal Pradesh. The physical act of prostrating and touching the floor visually expresses cultural and value differences from outsiders who do not perform this action, thus gaining meaning as a normative gesture of the Monpa. The repetition of prostration during rituals, such as offering merit in public spaces, fosters a sense of solidarity among Monpa. By touching the floor with their entire bodies, they transform that space into a *Monyul* space. Individual bodily actions extend into the land, linking with the constructed norms of *Monyul* to enhance the land's purity. At this point, prostration is not merely a cultural representation of *Monyul*; the act itself becomes one of the devices that physically creates the ritual space of *Monyul*. In this context, the embodiment and spatialisation of prostration are two sides of the same coin, which could be called "emplacement." Along with the revival of rituals and the creation of new rituals within the Buddhist revival, the construction of new stupas and massive Buddha statues has became widespread. Amid tensions with militarization, the "*Monyul*-ization" of living spaces based on Buddhist revival norms has progressed. Monpa people gathering in these spaces to perform prostration revitalized the space, in which bodies and land become intertwined, and these ritual spaces evolve into living *Monyul* inhabited by minority Buddhists in Arunachal Pradesh.

8. Conclusion

To resolve the tension between Shusterman's concept of self-improvement and the understanding of the relational self with an emphasis on its effacement in Tibetan Buddhism, I expanded Schusterman's somaesthetics theory by incorporating a sensory ethnographic approach that analyzes the relationship between permeable bodies and aesthetics from an intersubjective perspective. Regarding prostration, while emphasis has been placed on understanding others through asceticism and pain via repetitive single movements, among the Monpa people,

groups alongside the Monpa, such as Sherdukpen, Lispa, Chugpa, Miji (Sajolang), Aka (Hrusso), and Bugun (Khowa). The emphasis on *Monyul* and its culture in the Buddhist revival created ethnic tensions in West Kameng.

prostration is a creative art of living a good life. It is combined with other actions, such as offering food, reciting mantras, or dedicating the merits of prostration to others or monasteries, resulting in diverse versions of practice and experience. Within this context, prostration relates to Monpa sensibilities and aesthetics, experienced alongside rich emotions, such as joy, hope, closeness, anxiety, guilt, and fear. Furthermore, for Monpa, living in an increasingly militarized and uncertain world, the prostration movement possesses both embodied and emplaced aspects keyed to the relational self. Prostration is an act through which people mutually permeate Buddhas, deities, hungry ghosts, homes, monasteries, and lands, thereby erasing their boundaries. Yet, by linking with new norms in Buddhist revival and the image of *Monyul*, prostration also becomes an act that creates boundaries between *Monyul* space and other spaces. Like reciting mantras, prostration is an art of living that resonates in multiple senses within a process in which the body, aesthetics, and politics intertwine.

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Affective Somaesthetics: Reflections on Flowing and Feeling with Fire Dancers in Thailand

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Abstract: *This paper reflects on the entanglement of embodiment and affect in ethnographic research with male fire dancers in Southern Thailand's tourism industry. I explore my embodied learning with dancers and my attempts to attune to the affects that structure their worlds and their artistry. Central to fire dancers' art form is the cultivation of "flow" and particular energies that can be felt through this experience and aesthetic. I examine how my gendered embodiment affected how I moved in and through spaces with fire dancers, and my learning to sense and feel in new ways. The felt experiences and affects in fieldwork created opportunities for different corporeal relationalities, including the sharing of embodied knowledge and affects, but they also created moments of rupture and disconnect. In conversation with concepts of affect, embodiment, and somaesthetics, this paper foregrounds "flow" as an affective and embodied methodology that highlights the relational nature of our engagements in the field.*

Keywords: *affect, embodiment, ethnographic methodologies, dance, gender, Thailand*

> *Energy. First it is energy. Like showing your energy because you are the one holding the fire… You can give that energy to others, because we are energy. You know what I mean? It depends on if people understand this word – energy. If I sit here and you sit there and if I'm moody, it might feel not good for you. You can feel me. You can feel that something is not right. If I feel good, you will feel that too. So, we give the energy and people can feel it.*
>
> Thai fire dancer, Nu, explaining the role of performers

Fire dance is an iconic spectacle for tourists, performed at beach bars on the Thai islands almost exclusively by teams of young men from Thailand and Myanmar[1] . I was a music teacher on the outskirts of Bangkok in 2011, and as I arrived by boat to the island of Koh Samet for a weekend vacation, I saw, for the first time, the fiery swirls of this art form illuminating the beach. I was immediately fascinated as I knew that this performance was not "Thai" but was derived from global rave cultures. I wondered how it had been transformed into a touristic performance. When I returned for fieldwork a few years later, I learned of this evolution. Thai fire dance did not start as a performance genre but emerged from informal, friendly exchanges between Thai laborers and backpacking tourists in the 1990s and early 2000s. Thai dancers in the first

1 During fieldwork most of the migrant laborers on the islands were from Myanmar.

generation who witnessed this development shared that they saw tourists practicing flow art on the beaches with different "toys" (equipment) and started to learn with them. Flow art involves the rhythmic manipulation of different objects – such as batons, hoops, staff, and *poi*[2] – through improvised movement patterns that keep the body and object flowing steadily in a rhythm. When done to music, one moves to the rhythm with the object.

The art form was somewhat associated with a "hippie" counterculture in the early days when Thais and tourists would have jam sessions on beaches and in parks. However, the genre transformed into a widespread performance practice on many of the Thai islands and is now integrated into the market economy. Oral histories align this transformation with an expansion of the tourism industry in the late 2000s which saw an increase in beach bars and parties. Bar owners realized that having exciting performances in a party-style atmosphere encouraged tourists to stay at the establishment and continue spending money. Once a participatory movement practice for relaxation and fun, fire dance is now produced for tourist consumption with "toys" (flow art equipment) ignited using kerosene and lamp oil. Fire dance is a lucrative position because of the tips dancers can receive on top of their payment from bar owners. Most dancers have come from economically disadvantaged areas and leave their home villages to work in construction or customer service jobs in tourist centers. But upon learning of the notable advantages of dancing, some start to practice on the sidelines with friends until they can earn a spot on a fire dance team.

Despite its prominence on the islands, the genre is absent in official discourses and advertisements; fire dance is not valued in Thailand and it is not an aspect of Thai culture that the government feels is relevant and/or appropriate to showcase for tourist consumption. Rather, dance performances in the tourism industry tend to revolve around Thai classical and folk dance forms, and other traditions that align with very specific constructions of Thai national identity. Fire dance labor takes place with young tourists at beach parties, and fire dancers are often framed by Thais as deviant "beach boys" interested in parties, intimate relationships with tourists, and easy money, rather than as serious artists. *Farang* (white foreigner) tourist women also face stereotypes and are viewed as sexually immodest in Thailand; on the islands, this is bolstered by the fact that many tourists have romantic relationships with male beach bar laborers, including fire dancers (Pollock 2019, 2024).

Having lived in Thailand for three years prior to conducting ethnographic research in 2015, 2016, and 2019, I knew that my presence would be scrutinized. Being a *farang* female in this scene, I was crossing lines of gender, class, race, and culture that posed a variety of relational complexities. I studied flow art intensively, which I hoped would ease some of the challenges posed by my presence in this scene, while also providing me with critical embodied knowledge. However, early in my fieldwork I discovered multiple layers of embodiment and somatic awareness that extended beyond the physical movements of this art form. This article reflects on my experience conducting fieldwork with fire dancers, focusing on how my study of flow art shaped my ability to sense, feel, and learn as an ethnographer.

Embodiment, Affect, and Ethnography

The quote that opens this article catalyzes a key aspect of my ethnographic research with fire dancers – that is, the importance of feeling and producing what fire dancers refer to as "energies" (*phalang*) (Pollock 2024). The energies that fire dancers speak of are linked with Theravada

2 *Poi* originally derives from a practice among the Māori in Aotearoa. It has greatly influenced flow art and is one of the most common pieces of equipment used. *Poi* is both the dance and the objects which consist of two ropes with a ball attached to the ends (Condevaux 2009). Flow artists typically hold one in each hand and manipulate them together in patterns.

Buddhist moralities that discourage an attachment to money and ego. They foreground a reciprocal and affective relationship between performers and audiences which is valued in Thailand (Mitchell 2011; Pollock 2024; Tausig 2014). Fire dancers spoke about gaining an energetic attunement frequently during fieldwork, and it was clear that elucidating and further exploring the role of affect in their worlds was crucial. I revisit these affective concepts and discussions in this paper to explore their methodological implications. While academic research privileges what can be seen, heard, and documented, the emotions and energies of a moment don't always allow for such capture. Nu's urging to feel energy opens ethnographers to a world of activity that goes beyond the linguistic and discursive, calling us toward the vast array of possibilities through which information is shared.

Ethnographers of dance and musical practices have long discussed the centrality of the body to anthropological research, and the necessity of moving with our interlocutors in order to better understand how movement reverberates with social, cultural, political, and historical phenomena (Foster 1995; Hahn 2007; Kisliuk 1998; Sklar 1994, 2000, 2001; Ness 1992, 1995, 2004; Wong 2008, 2019). I followed this approach and was influenced by dance researcher Deidre Sklar, a pioneering scholar on embodied ethnographic approaches, who suggests that ethnographers "attend in a somatic mode [which] is to apprehend, as felt experience, the kinetic dynamics inherent in movements, images, and sounds" (2000, p. 72). Sklar poignantly notes the richness of accessing this knowledge noting that "ways of moving are ways of thinking" (2001, p. 4). She advocates for kinesthetic empathy as a research technique in which researchers not only observe movement but also try to sense the quality of the movements – their force and dynamic. This entails attending to another's movements through one's own body, which provides "a sampling of the proprioceptive, or 'felt' dimension of events" (1994, p. 15). Empathy, in this sense, is not about aligning with or feeling another's subjective state. Rather it is "the capacity to participate with another's movement or another's sensory experience of movement" (1994, p. 15). Fieldworkers often do this work unconsciously as they attempt to build rapport with their interlocutors, not only through dance practices but also through everyday movements and activities (Sklar 1994).

This type of somatic attention shaped how I did fieldwork, and particularly my intensive study of flow art with the dancers. Yet, the experiences and perspectives of my interlocutors also encouraged me to consider micro-movements and the barely felt sensations of a space; that is, those shared moods and energies that Nu mentions in the quote that opens this article. This type of kinesthetic empathy is not related to the macro bodily movements of dance that I was accustomed to studying, but to the interembodied surges of chemicals and vibes in a space, and to the transference of forces and moods among bodies (Brennan 2004). This requires different modes of attending to embodiment, relationality, and sensation. While kinesthetic empathy focuses on our ability to sense with others, affect theories help to elucidate what these sensations do and their particular "forces" (Rosaldo 1989). The affective turn has pushed anthropologists to rethink bodily ontologies and feeling in the field, albeit through two distinct approaches. New materialist approaches conceptualize affect as pre-conscious intensities that take shape through the interactions of bodies and environments, affecting what bodies can do. The body is understood as processual, porous, and co-participating in shaping the world (Barad 2007; Brennan 2004; Deleuze and Guattari 1983; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Manning 2006; Massumi 2002; Stewart 2007). The second approach to affect theory is influenced by the work of feminist and queer scholars and encourages that greater attention be paid to the ways in which emotions – as conscious, subject-centered phenomena – shape and are shaped by social and political power (Ahmed 2004, Berlant 2011; Cvetkovich 2003; Muñoz 2006; Sedgwick 2002).

Affect in fire dance communities resonates most closely with the new materialist rendering of affect as energies that circulate among porous bodies. This also corresponds with Southeast Asian, Theravada Buddhist, and animist ontological perspectives that highlight impermanence (*anicca*) and the transference of forces among objects, spirits, people, and landscapes as part of the fabric of social life (Allerton 2009; Århem 2016; Errington 1989; Guillou 2017). It is important to note that this lineage of affect theory has been critiqued for its tendency to separate affect from social, political, cultural, and linguistic contexts. Emily Martin, for example, seeks to remedy this situation by calling for more "robust ethnographic accounts that are specific about how human perceptions are social all the way down" (2013, p. S157). Fire dancers' conceptualizations and discussions of affect help bridge these divides; the energies fire dancers speak of can be named and are expressed as subjective conscious states and sensations that link with social moralities and the political. Yet, affect in fire dance worlds is also expressed as interpersonal and flowing in the social landscape among permeable bodies (Pollock 2024). This demonstrates an integration of affect theories that is noted elsewhere in Thailand (Cassaniti 2015).

Thailand is a context in which discerning affect is incredibly important as it provides valuable information on what is often unsaid. Social relations in Thailand operate through a social cosmetic that privileges a smoothness of interactions. Penny Van Esterik notes that "Thailand encourages an essentialism of appearances or surfaces" (2000, p. 4). This means ensuring the right speech (or silence) at the right time, with the right people. For example, getting angry in public is a disturbance of this smoothness. It is considered a break in social relations because of how the anger of one person affects others. This means that information or feelings are sometimes not communicated directly. They can simmer underneath surfaces requiring affective discernment. Through spending time in Thailand, I've learned that one must navigate the felt dimensions of social interactions, sense the anger of another person before it ruptures and adjust oneself, and learn about others' political views and social positions by virtue of things like dress, sounds, and even gesture (Herzfeld 2009; Tausig 2019). This highlights the importance of attuning to the social cosmetic's affective undercurrents through the body. This is a crucial layer of ethnographic research in Thailand, and these felt components of social life likely resonate in many other contexts where anthropologists work.

Somaesthetics in the Field

Somaesthetics provides a valuable framework for attending affectively in ethnographic research through the body. Richard Shusterman defines somaesthetics as "the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (soma) as a site of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning" (2008, p. 19). From a practical perspective, somaesthetics highlights the importance of bodily knowledge and supports the cultivation of deeper awareness through somatic practice so that we can feel and experience the world in new ways (Shusterman 2013). The body is "our most primordial tool of tools, our most basic medium for interacting with our various environments, a necessity for all our perception, action, and even thought" and enhancing this tool through increased somatic knowledge will "improve our understanding and performance in the diverse disciplines and practices that contribute to our mastery of the highest art of all – that of living better lives." (Shusterman 2008, p. 4). Pragmatic somaesthetics, moreover, encourages a consideration of how we shape our bodies as ethnographers during fieldwork as we attempt to build relationships; and, as an analytic tool, somaesthetics highlights the connections between such bodily engagements to

social and cultural systems of value and meaning (Shusterman 2013).

Extending Shusterman's framework into the realm of ethnography offers a perspective on bodily engagement that supports the relational nature of embodiment and affect. As fieldworkers, we share acts of feeling, sensing, and gaining an embodied perspective of a place with others; we are also being felt and sensed, and co-producing the affective atmospheres we find ourselves in. Somaesthetics emphasizes the dual nature of the body which "expresses the ambiguity of human being, as both subjective sensibility that experiences the world and as an object perceived in that world" (2008, p. 3). Deepening our bodily engagements and fine-tuning our somatic awareness naturally involves gleaning more insight into the intersubjective nature of affect and embodiment, and the co-production of social worlds. As Shusterman argues, "any acutely attentive somatic self-consciousness will always be conscious of more than the body itself" (2008, p. 8). As we cultivate our own awareness, we feel more of what is around us.

Fire dancers have a sharpened sense of bodily awareness by virtue of their labor and practice which demands a deep corporeal sensitivity that is directed not only toward themselves, but also toward others. As astute affective laborers, dancers are regularly assessing the energies of the audience to adjust their performances and ensure that they are producing the proper mix of affects for tourists. The networked nature of embodiment was always at the forefront of dancers' discussions of performance and practice. As one dancer described, performing for tourists offered him an opportunity to "put my heart in their heart to see how they feel" (Pollock 2024, p. 55). Dancers taught me the importance of attending to the micro-movements of vibes in the atmosphere and how these affects impact the social setting and our relationships with others. As ethnographers, we might learn from this type of somatic sensibility as it draws us toward more actively attending to, and reflecting on, our bodily engagements in the field and the affective environments and relations we co-produce.

Below, I reflect on my experiences doing flow art as a somatic practice and sensing in new ways during my participation in the fire dance scene. I discuss the relational nature of the shaping of my body and its energies. Particular bodily engagements helped me build rapport with fire dancers and more deeply understand the art form and its links to social, cultural, and political phenomena. However, affects intersected with these phenomena in complex ways. My gendered embodiment, I learned, could generate tensions, and our different positionalities and bodily histories meant that we did not always feel and interpret affects in the same way.

Gender, Surfaces, and Flow

Flow art, from which fire dance is derived, takes its name from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of a "flow" experience which is "a subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself" (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 2005, p. 600). It is a state of deep concentration with effortless attention focused on the task, and it is noted as intrinsically rewarding and motivating (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). While the dancers I worked with often discussed their motivation for daily practice in these terms – to gain relaxation and improve focus – flow was also a particular movement aesthetic. Having flow meant generating a smooth, seamless, and controlled pace that is centered in one's personal style. This aesthetic, however, also references sociopolitical and cultural values, and is thought to produce certain affects that are felt by audiences and fellow dancers. Fire dancers spoke of how an aesthetic of flow was connected to the "energy of artists." As Julia Cassaniti explains about ghostly energies in Thailand, "The energy that people talk about has to do, for the most part, with feelings, or desires, wishes, and attachments. Often the

energy is understood as a kind of residue, described as actions and attachments that one had (or has) in life" (2015, p. 135). Producing the energy of artists is a felt intentionality that showcases one's morality as an artist, and this is evidenced by a dancer's ability to affectively connect with the audience, as discussed earlier. It is energy that comes from the body and can be felt by others through the aesthetic of flow. As an aesthetic, affect, and experience, flow aligns with the valuing of smooth social relations. Moreover, it provides an apt metaphor for thinking about relationality and embodiment in the field.

My body sometimes allowed for the easy flow of relationships and shared pleasant affects with fire dancers. But at other times, it interfered in this smoothness and created disruptive intensities, often brought forth through my gendered embodiment. Gender in Thailand is also very much about surfaces, flow, and smoothness. It is a flexible concept, that is not linked to a static idea of identity, but to a range of dynamic behaviors and bodily aesthetics. Van Esterik notes that,

> surfaces are transformable, temporary and aesthetically pleasing, while the self – who he/she really is – remains unknowable, a worldly accommodation to the Buddhist concepts of *anatta* (non-self) and *anicca* (impermanence)…Thus, gender is best theorized as a context sensitive process constructed through interaction with others. Gendered surfaces are carefully and aesthetically presented in public to communicate how one expects to be treated. (2000, p. 203)

Presenting gendered surfaces might include disguises that shift and change through behaviors, tone of voice, language, dress, and various expressions of the body, but they are always determined with astute attention to spatio-temporal context (expressed in Thai as *kalatesa*) (Van Esterik 2000, p. 36).

This insight about surfaces helped me to structure how I embodied gender as an active process during fieldwork. I crafted a conservative surface when I was practicing with fire dancers during the day, often wearing longer pants and t-shirts, little or no makeup, and toned-down jewelry. I adopted a somewhat shy persona that felt natural to me. I remained in the background and took up as little space as possible when we were hanging out. Learning flow art (specifically, *poi*) with dancers was as much about embodying the movement from an ethnographic perspective as it was about crafting a certain type of presence and gendered surface. To be clear, I don't believe this was a surface that mattered to fire dancers, but it was one I felt most comfortable with given the complexities of my positionality in a scene in which *farang* women are often interpreted as trying to have romantic relations with fire dancers. I hoped that my intensive study of flow art demonstrated to others involved in fire dancers' worlds my intentions as a researcher and artist.

I learned and practiced flow art with two teams of dancers on the islands of Koh Samui and Koh Phi Phi, and casually with expats and Thais at a park when I transited through Bangkok. While I had participated in various dance and musical practices throughout my life, flow art was new to me. On both Koh Samui and Koh Phi Phi, I was given a few initial one-on-one *poi* sessions with the leader of a fire art team, and then I was thrust into practicing and learning with other dancers through participatory exchanges in the spaces where they practiced during the day. My learning with dancers was deeply embodied. I was encouraged to incorporate the *poi* into myself and feel the equipment as part of my body. I was asked to put my hands on my teachers' and other dancers' bodies to feel the rhythm of how they were executing certain moves, to "feel the balance" of the object, as one dancer described.

While learning a new move might take a few hours, learning to flow and gaining access to a

flow experience took months. When you are flowing, the object you are moving with ceases to be an object; the balance is so perfect that it is simply your body moving. As one teacher explained, "the body is first" and the *poi* follows. The *poi* became an extension of my body, profoundly shaping my experience. In my fieldnotes, I wrote about how powerful it felt to extend myself fully into space beyond the limits of what my body could do without the *poi*. This was a marked difference to the quiet surface I was crafting which felt more like I was part of the background in the spaces with dancers. Gaining access to this new bodily force allowed me to embody space in a new way.

Social norms and expectations shape how women move and use their bodies in the world. Iris Marion Young argues that women's gestures and physical habits can subconsciously reflect gendered cultural expectations of passivity (1980). I certainly felt a breaking of embodied constraints with flow art, constraints that I didn't know I had. *Poi* grew my limbs and my body, producing a surface that extended beyond the passive persona that I enacted as I tried to tuck myself away during fieldwork. I felt as though affects of power and strength were being exuded from my body, counteracting the quiet, barely sensed energy I attempted to produce. Flow art provided an outlet through which I could experiment with different gendered feelings and surfaces, and it generated opportunities for new forms of relationality.

The way fire dancers taught me mirrored the way they had been taught through a method they called "sharing" (*baeng pan*) (Pollock 2024); this involves learning and developing one's artistry with others in a participatory manner in which you "share" different tricks (movement patterns) and knowledge. This approach highlighted the participatory ethos underpinning flow art's emergence in the country; dancers felt this needed to be kept alive in the midst of the genre's move into capitalist economies that privilege economic accumulation over the generation of friendships and the reciprocity of sharing. Attaining the aesthetic of flow is achieved by combining moves in one's own style, tempo, and patterns. And, because of the way it is taught, each move has typically been shared by another dancer. When I was combining my different tricks, a pleasant feeling of nostalgia accompanied my movements. As I flowed, I recalled each person who had taught me. Flowing felt as if I was in relation with others while also exhibiting my own style and embodiment. I learned moves in parks and on different islands from many dancers and spent hours flowing with them and by myself. It became almost a ritual practice that was less about learning and more about relating to people, building friendships, and curbing feelings of loneliness that accompanied my fieldwork. As I flowed during and after my time in Thailand, I felt the presence of each person that had shared with me, and I came to understand energies and flow as embodied interactions that connect us affectively with others even when we are not in close proximity.

As discussed, flow is said to produce the energy of artists that affectively signals to others one's commitment to the art form. While I practiced daily and was able to flow at some points, my body did not always produce these energies. Rather, it could generate affects that disrupted the smoothness of social relations and surfaces. I had to change my gendered surface frequently during fieldwork as I traversed the geographies of the fire dance scene – from secluded daytime practice sessions with dancers to the tourist-oriented beach parties at night where I watched the fire shows and got to know tourists and expats involved in the bar scenes. I felt most myself around fire dancers during the day, as described earlier. The nighttime beach parties required a completely different form of gendered embodiment in which I transformed from the serious researcher-student into a *farang* tourist. My body felt tense and unlike itself in these contexts as I had to muster new energies to produce an extroverted persona so that I could gain access to this scene. In preparing my surface for the beach parties, I wore short skirts, tight string tank

tops, and larger earrings. I applied eye makeup, blush, and lipstick, and fixed my hair into a bun. I would stand alone at the bar, my chest pushed forward appearing confident. I shook nervously beneath a surface that was extroverted and friendly, able to engage people and invite them into conversation.

While I became adept at playing with my surfaces across these different contexts, certain affects stuck to my body (Ahmed 2004); the overt eroticism of the beach parties and deviant sexuality associated with *farang* female tourists became difficult to remove, as if they had somehow reached beyond what my surface could produce. Interestingly, my gendered embodiment and surface expressions became very much shaped by the women around me, perhaps in an attempt to relieve the grip of these energies. For example, on the island of Koh Phi Phi, I became friends with Pit, a Thai woman who owned the guesthouse where I stayed. She offered to help with the research since she had lived on the island for years. I had initially thought this support might entail introducing me to fire dancers; rather, it involved accompanying me to the beach parties and/or finding others to chaperone me. One day she introduced me to a bar owner and explained that she did this so, "people will know you are here to be serious." Pit was concerned about my nightly participation on the beaches and would often ask why I was out so late, subtly signaling her concern. She was worried, she told me, that I would start to like the parties too much. While these were indirect conversations, it was clear that Pit thought I might become too closely associated with the party lifestyle of the islands.

Other encounters were more forceful and drew in tense energies that fractured the flow of relations. These interactions did not happen with fire dancers, but with their girlfriends, many of whom were *farang*. Some shared stories of female tourists trying to participate in these worlds but only with the intention of having intimate relationships with dancers, and to experience the eroticism that can accompany this scene. It is important to note that fire dancers do not view their art as sexual, even though they are often interpolated by tourists as sexual figures. Some farang women warned how this sexualization would create barriers for my research. One person advised that even though I might be serious about art and research, the beach vibes had lingering influences; the energies of the beach parties produced a sexualized feeling, generated through the encouragement of drinking alcohol, playing games that centered heterosexual intimacy, and dance parties that fueled sexual touch (Pollock 2024). These were affects I cannot name but felt as forces that compelled people at the parties to behave in highly sexual ways that reverberate with representations of Thailand as a place of abandon and sexual adventure. I often sat on the sidelines feeling this energy, but sometimes I was swept into it through the participatory nature of ethnography; I danced with tourists to the DJ'd music that happened between the fire performance sets and deflected the advances of male tourists who pursued women relentlessly in these spaces. My presence at the beach parties meant that my body was wrapped up with these energies, which seemed to swirl around my gendered surfaces even after I left these spaces. This was a stickiness that was able to break through my curated gendered displays, highlighting the ways in which atmospheric affects get inside the individual (Brennan 2004, p. 1).

These clashes of energies and surfaces provoked my initial experience dancing with my *poi* lit on fire. I was at a bar outside the tourist area with a group of fire dancers and their girlfriends one evening listening to a band and sharing food. Many of the dancers were off work that night and had brought their flow art equipment for fun. The pleasant energy of our evening was interrupted, quite suddenly, when a girlfriend of one of the dancers told me that I should light my *poi* on fire and dance. The atmosphere filled with tension as if the oxygen had been sucked out of the space – silence and a deadness of feeling subsumed the conversation. I knew the dangers of dancing with fire and had decided prior to fieldwork that I would only do it if

and when I felt fully ready. I immediately expressed my discomfort in front of the group and explained that I was not yet experienced enough. There was silence from dancers who looked on in bewilderment at her suggestion and, I imagine, sensed the friction. But the pressure from her continued. I felt as if I was being challenged to prove that I was "serious," and that my intentions were truly artistic and scholarly. My body shook with adrenaline as I explained that I really needed more time. One dancer broke the tension and took me aside. I thought he was giving me an opportunity to say no. But instead, he said compassionately that I should try and that he would help me. I sensed there was no other choice but to dance in an attempt to contain the odd vibe that had infiltrated our group.

I walked to the side of the area where the band was playing while that same dancer prepared the equipment for me. He stood close by and instructed me to let the *poi* move my body, expressing that it was no different from what I had been practicing. He dipped the *poi* in accelerant, ignited them in a burst of heat, and handed them to me. I stood with the *poi* in my hands and felt a different weight than what I was used to. The balance was different. Shaking, and as others watched, I stood up straight and began to swing my arms at the sides of my body to get the *poi* moving. The intensity of heat was overwhelming, as was the sound; I could not hear anything other than the flames whipping around my head, and the sweet smell of kerosene began burning my nose. This was far beyond what I had sensed kinesthetically from watching fire dance shows. It was a moment when the full force of kinesthetic empathy beckoned for my attention – trembling limbs, sweat dripping down my back, arms tingling with warmth, kerosene and smoke entering my nose and eyes, and the eerie silencing of the music and conversation by the noise of the flames.

One of my biggest fears was that the fire *poi* would become entangled in the air and then wrap around my body. As I spun, I recalled the dancer reminding me that I was in control of the *poi* and to "just drop them" if anything went wrong. However, the body's impetus is to move away from danger, and to respond to the overwhelmingness of sensory experience. But, if your body moves, so do the *poi*. The urge to have the fire *poi* as far away from my body as possible was nearly uncontrollable. I was imagining extending my limbs as far as they could go, but I felt as if I had shrunk into myself and become smaller. A desire to disappear took over my body which wanted to fold in on itself to escape the flames extending out from my hands. Fire dancers on all islands discussed how powerful they felt dancing with fire, but I did not feel this. The sense of power I felt extending my arms and (re)embodying space that I knew kinesthetically from flow art practice was absent. At some point, I dropped the *poi* beside me and we carried on with our night out.

It took some time to process the feelings surrounding this event. My initial impetus was to critically assess the problematic nature of the encounter with the *farang* woman who pressured me to dance. However, there was an affective force (Rosaldo 1989) accompanying that moment. Sticky affects (Ahmed 2004) and atmospheric intensities (Brennan 2004) shaped my presence and each of our experiences that evening. Perhaps there were conversations among girlfriends and fire dancers about my presence that demanded this to happen. I will never know. However, upon reflection I understand this moment as an affective urging for me to access sensations that I likely would have never felt otherwise; that is, what this art form feels like for fire dancers who get up nightly, some with little training, and dangerously whirl fire around their bodies. I could not experience the power they felt dancing with fire, but I glimpsed what surely must accompany some of their performances – the body reacting to fear with surges of chemicals and hormones that produce shaking limbs, and which compel the body to escape from the fire that surrounds it. Fire dancers maintain their strong surfaces during these moments, gaining control

over their bodily reactions to the intensities that whirl and drift in this scene.

This experience revealed how affects of power, fear, and precarity coincide. Importantly, it highlighted the unequal stakes of flow; it is a beautiful and calming art form that fire dancers dedicate their lives to, but danger and precarity lurk in ways that I hadn't felt in my daily practice; fire dancers must contend with their bodies breathing in fuel, the possibility of sustaining burns, of precarious and unstable forms of labor, and of a haunting presence of marginalization in Thailand. I say this not to take away from the power these dancers feel. Rather, I am foregrounding the different opportunities for sensing and working with affect we each brought to flow art. My understanding of the energy of artists deepened through this encounter. There is far greater difficulty in achieving and maintaining a flow during the heated pressure of performance. Perhaps what was being practiced as we did flow art each day was less about the movements and tricks I was trying to perfect, and more about the ability to enter the state of deep concentration that flow is said to elicit, and develop control over the body – the breath, the heart, adrenaline – as it responds to a range of atmospheric intensities.

Conclusions

Our embodiments in the field are never neutral; my gendered *farang* embodiment was swept up into different flows of energies and produced affects alongside those I was with. In this sense, my crafting of surfaces only allowed me a limited extension into the scene and its felt sensations. Other atmospheric interventions shaped how I was perceived and felt by those around me. In this sense, while affects might be pre-conscious intensities and vibes, their energetic flows reverberate with the social, cultural, and political. Affects, like our bodies, are not neutral. Thinking through these intersubjective flows of energies bridges what are often assumed to be gaps between the two different affect theory strains; affects are immaterial potentialities, but they can also flow with and collide into contexts and, as such, are "social all the way down" as noted by Martin (2013, p. S157).

As a somatic practice, learning flow art fostered experimentation with bodily feelings and opened me to sensing the subtleties and textures of micro-events and movements; these are the inner bodily sensations, the whirls of chemicals and hormones, the twitching of muscles, bodily tensions, and the chills on one's skin that signal an unidentifiable atmospheric happening. I did not always sense in the same ways as dancers and, at times, misinterpreted bodily knowledge. However, I agree with Shusterman who notes that "rather than rejecting the body because of its sensory deceptions, we should try to correct the functional performance of the senses by cultivating improved somatic awareness and self-use, which can also improve our virtue by giving us greater perceptual sensitivity and powers of action" (2008, p. 5). Flow invited me into a new framework of sensing with dancers and sharpened my body's ability to feel.

Revisiting these experiences of flow opens a consideration of its meaning as an affective and relational mode of being with others in the field. Flow, as a methodological tool, urges us to attend deeply and fully to the smoothness and fractures in our relations with others. Flow is ultimately about finding a balance of how our bodies interact with others and how we extend into particular spaces. In this sense, flow is a way of being in the field – of feeling energetic moments and undercurrents of affects with curiosity and bodily awareness to help guide our responses and relations. Doing affect-based research requires a much deeper commitment to embodied fieldwork, one that delves far below the surface to better grasp the most minute sensations being expressed and co-produced. Somaesthetics is a valuable framework for cultivating this affective awareness, for understanding the relationality of our bodies, and for analyzing how embodiment

reverberates with sociocultural and political realms.

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Seselelãme: Aŋlɔ-Eʋe Refractions of an African Somaesthetics

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Abstract: *This article draws on both personal experience and long-term ethnographic research into Aŋlɔ bodily ways of knowing, as given in the Eʋe phrase seselelãme (perceive-perceive-at-flesh-inside). We use the term refractions in the title to signal how this local "foundational schema" is related to what has been dubbed an African Somaesthetics. We address such topics as body sculpting, kinaesthetic styles, forms of greeting, adornment and the idea of the porosity of selves, and enucleate – that is, explicitly relate all this – to the biotic, organic, and ecosystem qualities of seselelãme. We argue that understanding somaesthetics in Aŋlɔland (southeastern Ghana) requires grasping the significance of interactivity and exploring how body, nature, and spirit dynamically interweave in Aŋlɔ ways of knowing – and becoming, or self-fashioning.*

Keywords: *sensory ethnography, Ghana, child socialization, adornment, music and dance.*

Richard Shusterman is the founder of the somaesthetics project. He defines somaesthetics as "an ameliorative discipline" that concerns the body "as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning," and which aims to "enrich not only our abstract, discursive knowledge of the body but also our lived somatic experience and performance" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 27). The roots of Shusterman's thought are in the British tradition of analytic philosophy (he studied under J.O. Urmson at Oxford), the American pragmatist tradition (most notably James and Dewey, with Rorty as foil), and Continental philosophy (most notably Michel Foucault, not so much Merleau-Ponty).[1] The somaesthetics project is also indebted to various Eastern philosophies of the body: for example, Shusterman cites the Chinese notion of *shenti*, or the "sentient purposive body-mind" as central to being-a-person (Shusterman, 2016, 22:01). In 2021, the somaesthetics project took on an African hue with the publication of *African Somaesthetics* (2021), edited by Catherine F. Botha. Shusterman's joint philosophy of embodiment and philosophy of aesthetics is, therefore, a markedly syncretic body of work, which has gone increasingly global in recent years. One of his remarks about the genealogy of somaesthetics is particularly revelatory: he calls it "a new name for some old ways of thinking"

1 On Shusterman's differences with Richard Rorty see Festenstein & Thompson, 2001, pp. 153-57: Rorty just does not get the idea that there can be nondiscursive knowledge. On how Shusterman's approach complements that of Foucault see Antoniol and Marino 2024. Other, non-philosophical influences on Shusterman's thinking include the somatic practitioner/educators: Moshe Feldenkrais (Shusterman is a certified practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method), F.M. Alexander, Wilhelm Reich, and Zen meditation practices.

(University of Sydney, 2016, 15:33).

In this article, we would like to flesh out the African dimensions of the somaesthetics project further by drawing the Aŋlɔ-Eʋe conception of bodily ways of knowing and becoming given in the term seselelãme into the discussion. Our approach differs from that of the contributors to *African Somaesthetics*, who are mainly concerned with the analysis of artistic productions, such as dance and other performance genres (including film), by virtue of its grounding in the practice of sensory ethnography (Vannini, 2023). Sensory ethnography is the methodology of choice for the anthropology of the senses (Geurts, 2003; Howes, 1991, 2003, 2023). It is nicely captured in the following quotation from *The Life of the Senses* by François Laplantine: "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).

Our concern, therefore, is with how the senses are made and people make sense of their sense-experience within the framework of a particular "foundational schema" (Shore, 1996). We seek to describe the everyday life of the senses in Aŋlɔland (southeastern Ghana) and the lives of Aŋlɔ-Eʋe-speaking people now living in diaspora. This account will hopefully contribute yet more nuance to the markedly syncretic and also very ancient concept of somaesthetics, beginning with a consideration of body sculpting, then moving on to discuss modes of comportment (or "techniques of the body"), dance, and finally, how clothes and drinking names make the person.

1. Bearings

We start with two observations, the first by scholar of Aŋlɔ metaphysics Roseline Elorm Adzogble. She reveals that "to be an existent thing, in Aŋlɔland, is to shuffle persistently between the physical and the spiritual" (Adzogble, 2022, p. 13). "Actuality" in this context is "born out of interactivity." The second is by Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong who, in his eco-social history of this same cultural setting, states: "One is struck by the centrality of ecology, history and spiritual power in the matrix of daily life in Aŋlɔ" (Akyeampong, 2001, p. 220). Komabu-Pomeyie grew up in this environment, and currently resides in Burlington, Vermont. Geurts is an anthropologist based at Hamline University, Saint Paul, Minnesota, who has engaged in ethnographic research with Aŋlɔ-Eʋe people for several decades. Our partnership has enabled us to collaboratively interrogate the multiple levels of meaning condensed in the Eʋe phrase *seselelãme*. Here we will probe the emphasis placed on interactivity (highlighted by Adzogble) and introduce the notion of ecosystem in an effort to enucleate what is distinctive about Aŋlɔ somaesthetics.

Seselelãme can be glossed as bodily ways of knowing. Translated literally, it means perceive-perceive-at-flesh-inside.[2] It differs from the conventional (Euroamerican) five-sense model of the sensorium because, in addition to seeing, hearing (which is particularly prominent), smelling, tasting and touching, it attaches a premium to balance, proprioception, kinaesthesia, and skin stimulation. *Seselelãme* furthermore connects perceptual processes to the development of personhood, morality, well-being and relationality, as will be enucleated in what follows.

2. Inculcating Aesthetic Values through Child Socialization Practices

Seselelãme undergirds and suffuses processes of enculturation from the moment of birth. According to Aŋlɔ conceptions of human physiology, a newborn child's head is not particularly solid. The fontanelle, a soft spot between the cranial bones, is perceived as fragile or weak, and

2 To be rigorously empirical about it, *seselelãme* could be rendered as "feel-feel-at-flesh inside" or "hear-hear-at-flesh-inside" (sese- carries both meanings) and thus evokes an audio-tactile sensibility (Geurts, 2003, pp. 47-49).

caregivers utilize hot water to massage and shape the baby's skull soon after birth. Komabu-Pomeyie explains that this practice of Aŋlɔ-Eʋe caregivers has been understood historically as having both aesthetic and functional goals. Massage serves to create a beautiful shape of the skull, and closing the soft spot safeguards the intellectual-spiritual potential of the newborn. Bringing the cranial bones together is accomplished with water-based massage, and this practice also serves to expose the baby to the element of water, as being both hot and cold or bitter and sweet, hence as balanced. Introducing the baby to "both waters" (according to Komabu-Pomeyie's mother) enables the infant to know and appreciate essential differences as they develop. The symbolic role played by water in this process can be related to the fact that, as historian Sandra Greene has observed: "To enter the central district of Aŋlɔ is to journey into a land of water, where lagoon and sea, pond and creek are ever present. … Water is at the center of Aŋlɔ culture" (Greene, 2002, p. 35). Akyeampong has claimed that "water in general constituted a powerful spiritual fluid" in Aŋlɔland (Akyeampong, 2001, p. 112).

The baby's first bath, an important ceremonial event conducted by a local midwife, provides the occasion to begin molding arms and legs into aesthetically pleasing flesh and blood accoutrements. In the mid 1990s, Geurts attended deliveries (in the rural area), and learned how these body sculpting practices were initiated (Geurts, 2003, pp. 85-107). After a midwife has washed the skin, to remove the vernix caseosa, she would typically place the freshly scrubbed neonate on her outstretched legs, facing down, then gently massage, manipulate, and even pull on the baby's legs. She would then bring the arms together at the infant's back, touching the hands to each other numerous times, to work at elongating each arm. She would also massage and shape the elbows and wrists. An elderly Aŋlɔ midwife explained that people "don't want the elbows sticking out … they want it supple." Many expressed the concern that without this manipulation, individuals would grow up not able to hold or align their arms well, instead leaving them to flop at their sides. During this interview, the husband of the midwife chimed in: "We want our people to be supple. They need to be able to move freely … not rigid in their body or their thinking" (Ibid, p. 97). This aesthetic determination of a particular physical presence and style is underscored by Aŋlɔ-Eʋe dance scholar Sylvanus Kuwor: "Formation of this body type does not materialize without the concerted efforts of mothers who use warm water, shea butter, towel and other materials to gently press and rub their babies to achieve what is considered the Aŋlɔ human figure" (Kuwor, 2017, p. 61).

Aŋlɔ child socialization practices also involve nurturing balance as an aesthetic value and practical skill. Before the baby could walk, there was frequent prompting and encouragement to sit up – sometimes utilizing props to support a wobbly, teetering infant, enabling them to experience (and come *to know*) the feeling of equilibrium or equipoise. A cardboard box, for example, provided a frame in which the baby was seated with legs extended forward, using the sides of the box to support their back. This was significant because it encouraged active development of the ability to balance: *Do agbagba!* (balance!) was an utterance Geurts often heard caregivers say while ministering to their babies.

In later months, caregivers would begin raising the baby up on his or her feet, sometimes with the use of a jury-rigged harness: a strip of cloth crossing the baby's chest and threaded backwards through their armpits. Holding the ends of the cloth, a caregiver would assist the baby with uprightness and provide support while they made their first tentative steps. Caregivers typically called this *agbagbaɖoɖo* or balancing. Once actually walking, children would spend many hours head-loading buckets of water, chairs (even desks), bundles of firewood, and pots of food cooked by the mother to be delivered to their father. Learning to balance thus forms an integral part of life from an early age and was considered not only good for the body's health

and well-being, but vital to knowing – knowing yourself as human (compared, in part, to four legged animals, ancestors, and spirits), knowing the *mawu* (male) and *segbo-lisa* (female) dimensions of being, and knowing how to balance. Interestingly, the placenta was understood as the neonate's equivalent to the lineage stool: midwives talked about the baby sitting on a stool (i.e., the placenta) inside the womb already practicing the art of balance, and how the placenta was a lifeline just as the lineage stool symbolically provided a person with knowledge of their genealogical heritage, their place in the world. It was customary to bury the placenta under a tree near the child's birthplace.

These actions, on the part of Aŋlɔ-Eʋe caregivers, to intentionally shape and improve childrens' bodily skills and presentation, provide an apt illustration of the emphasis on melioration in Shusterman's account of somaesthetics. In his own words, somaesthetics "concerns the body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning … it seeks to enhance the understanding, efficacy, and beauty of our movements and improve the environments to which our movements contribute and from which they draw their energies and significance" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 27). We can see this playing out in the special attention Aŋlɔ caregivers ascribe to massaging infants, introducing them to the nature of water, and inculcating an acute sense of balance. In this way, both caregivers and newborns "shuffle persistently between the physical and the spiritual" in their "interactivity" and achievement of "actuality" (Adzogble, 2022, p. 13).

Lugulugu is a term that on a surface level refers to a person walking in a dawdling, swaying, or drunken-like manner. Geurts first heard the word sometime in 1994 when a mother began shouting at her sons for moving about in a wayward, aimless manner when they were supposed to be focused on fetching water from the well. It caught her attention because she had already encountered ideas about the way you move being inextricably linked to your disposition, moral character, and psychological processes. Indeed, the Aŋlɔ-Eʋe language contains a large collection of phrases that capture kinesthetic styles (Geurts, 2003, pp. 77-80). Not only is there an ideal "Aŋlɔ human figure" having to do with the shape of arms, legs, and head (Kuwor, 2017, p. 61), then, but so too are there different manners of mobility, or stylized ways of walking – what Marcel Mauss (1979) dubbed "techniques of the body." Such techniques, which are acquired through a process of mimesis, may be understood as "the nature that culture uses to create second nature" (Taussig, 1993, 233).

Raw (or unconditioned) nature was the source (in the estimation of most Aŋlɔ people) of some unbecoming styles of movement, such as walking like a duck (*zɔ ɖaboɖabo*), scurrying around like mice or rats (*zɔ lumɔlumɔ*), or walking with your head held like a buffalo (*zɔ gblulugblulu*). Animal ways also inspired positive models for movement such as *zɔ kadzakadza* which refers to walking majestically or boldly like a lion; also, *zɔ bɔlɔbɔlɔ* which is tantamount to moving elegantly like an elephant, and *zɔ dzidzedzetɔe* which means walking gracefully and proudly like a peacock. When Geurts heard caregivers in her compound start shouting at their boys, remonstrating them for moving *lugulugu*, she asked them why it mattered. They explained that moving about in such a wayward style would begin to permeate the boys' whole being. The logic was that if you move in a *lugulugu* fashion you experience sensations of *lugulugu*-ness and begin thinking in a *lugulugu* way, with the risk of developing into a *lugulugu* sort of person. We can see here an example of Shusterman's point about the intimate connection between aesthetic values and moral values – that is, of Aŋlɔ people actively seeking to "enhance the understanding, efficacy, and beauty of … movements" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 27) engaged in by their progeny.

Significantly, Aŋlɔ-Eʋe scholar and musicologist Nissio Fiagbedzi states that "in Ewe thought all creation, natural or man-made, must exhibit *some form of art,*" and the "entire universe and

everything within it including [humans] holistically and individually *partake of and reflect art*" (Fiagbedzi, 2005, p. 4, 17, emphasis added). Fiagbedzi further explains that *aɖaŋu* is the Aŋlɔ-Eʋe term closest to "art," but based on its use in the language he suggests that it would be more fitting to gloss the term as "skillful" or "clever." By way of illustration, we have seen how training the body to be supple and flexible is supposed to ensure suppleness and flexibility of mind. This is considered a cardinal virtue, the reason being that the Aŋlɔ-Eʋe are a minority ethnic group in Ghana, with a long history of migration and persecution, yet they hold a disproportionate number of government positions and have also enjoyed considerable entrepreneurial success. The reason for this success is encapsulated in a proverb: *Ne neyi akpɔkplɔwo fe dume eye wotsyɔ akɔ la, wo ha natsyɔ akɔ* (If you visit the village of the toads and find them squatting, you must squat too) (Geurts, 2003, p. 96). In other words, both the resilience and the success of the Aŋlɔ-Eʋe people is associated with striving to live a balanced life and being able to assume many different postures, depending on the demands of the situation. This is their "art of living" (Antoniol and Marino 2024).

3. "Living, Moving Bodies" and the Role of Music and Dance

Art historian John Henry Drewal has observed that: "Balancing and artful motion are important concerns for Yorùbá as expressed in the saying: *àìdúró, ijó ni* ("not-standing-still is dancing")" (Drewal, 2024, p. 275). This observation regarding Yorùbá-speakers applies equally to Eʋe-speakers, for the two peoples share many cultural traits, including this sentiment. The notion of "artful motion" is particularly key to understanding African somaesthetics.

It has been argued that pragmatic somaesthetics encompasses both experiential and representational modes, which means that we can simultaneously attend to our interior milieu and feelings while tracking and modifying the display we project outwards. As South African dance scholar Devon Bailey (2021, p. 137) explains: "Dance as a performing art is at a direct crossroads between the experiential aspect of what it feels like and the representational aspect of what it looks like." This observation resonates with our account of *lugulugu* and how caregivers perceived an appearance of waywardness in the gait of their young boys carrying out chores to be connected to a potential moral decline in their sensibilities. *Seselelãme* reveals that these two dimensions, outward appearance and inner compass or moral attitude, are indissociable.

This connection can be appreciated yet more fully by considering the following account of an interview with Eʋe dancer Emmanuel Agbeli conducted by dance scholar Sheron Wray. Wray studied under Agbeli (who she refers to as Nani) and carried out research at his Dagbe Arts Center in southeastern Ghana in the summer of 2013. The interview centred on Agbeli's approach to improvisation and the "musical questions" he is responding to in the course of an improv:

> When Nani responds to musical questions in such moments he carefully controls his dispensation of energy. Through his bodily-attuned cognitive processes of *seselelame*, particularised as *nusese*, he accesses a dynamic palette of kinetic forces with which he communicates his intention to his audience and collaborators. He is calibrated to a high energetic level, which means he has inordinate amounts of force and control at his disposal that he can keenly direct artistically. These variables operate as a technique to bring the audience's precise focus to where he directs his energy within his body. In other words, he controls the audience's gaze, reading them kinaesthetically. Through deploying this technique he evokes deliberate kinaesthetic responses in his audience such as suspension, surprise and excitement (Wray, 2016, p. 149).

Agbeli and Wray are both professional dancers so we acknowledge that there is a level of skill and expertise in these reflections that we would not necessarily hear from ordinary people. We will address this lacuna presently. But here let us appreciate the bodily *ways of knowing* and doing on display in this account. *Nusese* refers to aural perception or hearing, so in this passage Wray draws our attention to Agbeli's inner swirl of sound + energy + cognition and explains that he technique-fully harnesses these forces to direct the audience's awareness, rather like the pull of a magnet.[3] Wray calls this "reading them [the audience] kinaesthetically." Thus, Agbeli's inner sensations are marshalled in the service of displaying or re-presenting his somaesthetics of *artful motion*; this then pulls his audience into his orbit and, Wray suggests, creates in them suspension, surprise, and excitement – interpreted as *kinaesthetic feelings* (rather than emotion). This entanglement of sensibilities is similar to the interactivity around *lugulugu* that we discussed earlier. That is, bodily movement possesses the power to pull, like a magnet. Others can become entangled not only at the superficial level of viewing gestures or comportment, but are also, ineluctably, drawn into a socially shared understanding of inner sensibilities at play in the total dynamic. What is instantiated here is a culturally-specific way of sensing, a highly refined form of *kinaesthetic intelligence*, which eclipses the polarization of mind and body in the conventional western definition of "intelligence."

In *African Somaesthetics*, we find several critical observations that support our view of the significance of *seselelãme* and underscore the position on kinaesthesia that we have just advanced. For example, Botha (2021, p. 4) avers that "there is a Black aesthetic tradition" (emphasis added), while the philosopher Paul C. Taylor and colleagues premise their discussion of somaesthetics on the recognition that *embodiment* is "among the most prominent of the recurring themes in the Black aesthetic tradition" (Taylor et al, 2021, p. 41). Furthermore, the contributors to *African Somaesthetics* treat kinaesthesia as a powerful organizing schema. In their exploration of somaesthetics they focus on "Black bodies as living, moving, loci of immediate experience and kinetic enjoyment" (p. 46) not because they are studying professional dancers but because this disposition exemplifies a prominent theme within an African somaesthetics. We suggest that two professional dancers learning from each other and excavating the inner workings of their art can inject greater precision into our ethnographic account of kinaesthetic intelligence among ordinary people.

Agbadza is a classic Eʋe style of dance. Wray found herself dancing this style when she attended a funeral. At traditional funerals, long benches are typically available for seating so there is an ebb and flow of people dancing, then sitting down to rest, then rising to join in the dance again. Wray explains that: "Individuals began moving at any time during a song for any duration, although drum rolls created added impetus" (Wray, 2016, p. 155). She then describes an interaction that she did not expect:

> I attended a funeral and while dancing the movement coda at the end of the sequence a participant, not someone with whom I was yet acquainted, placed their hands on my shoulders in a similar way that I might assist a student in a dance class, and firmly adjusted my movement to indicate proper carriage. Perhaps this was to achieve greater coherence with the motion of the group, or accent of drum, or maybe the song? It is impossible to say

3 The primacy of aurality (*nusese*) in this account of Agbeli's practice invites comparison with the notion of "intermodal transfer" developed by Paul C.Taylor et al.: "We use this expression to mark the way an aesthetic object that works mainly in one medium or by way of one perceptual pathway might rely, for some of its impact, on the space it makes for the work of another pathway" (Taylor et al, 2021, p. 50). Taylor et al give the example of a photograph of a scream, or a film of bodies in motion. Transposed into the terms of our ethnography in this essay, to be a creative agent in Aŋlɔland, or "visionary dancer" like Agbeli (as one might say in English) translates as "auditionary" (*nusese*) in the context of Aŋlɔ self-fashioning.

> precisely. I was surprised by this sudden physical contact but I adjusted to it, assessing that this hands-on coaching was inspired by a desire to see me dance Agbadza more fully (Wray, 2016, p. 155).

This moment described by Wray resonates with our earlier discussion of interactivity. Kinesthesia matters. Synchronizing body movements holds great power in this cultural world. Wray's dance movements were not "fully" Agbadza and so prompted intervention just as the *lugulugu* boys' behavior provoked a stern response from their caregivers.

It is telling that Wray surmised that the importunate gesture (hands-on coaching) may have been "inspired by a desire to see me dance Agbadza more fully." Here is a meliorative display of local somaesthetics. As a classic *artful motion* among Eʋe people, *agbadza* reflects bodily ways of knowing movement in which they take particular pride. Significantly, anthropologist Steven Friedson has suggested that: "What makes this dance beautiful, according to Ewes, is how the back moves, particularly how the shoulder blades come together. This movement is not initiated by the arms, as novices … usually try to perform this dance, but the arms move as a result of bringing the shoulder blades together. This is a subtle difference but crucial to the correct feeling and look, for it leaves the arms free and loose" (Friedson, 2009, p. 205). Friedson's account harkens back to our description of the baby's first bath when caregivers or midwives begin massaging and flexing the neonate's arms, bringing them together behind the back in precisely the same fashion.

Wray's (2016) various insights about dance include a delightful analogy that illuminates what she calls the "quartet-like nature" of *seselelãme*. Not only does *seselelãme* defy the mind-body split characteristic of certain non-African traditions, it also emphasizes the sociocultural and environmental *embeddedness* of persons. Using language that is not actually very germane to the Aŋlɔ-Eʋe context (but we forgive her this for the sake of exposition), Wray writes:

> Cognitive scientists understand that 'the fundamental building blocks of cognitive processes are control schemata for motor patterns that arise from perceptual interaction within the body's environment' … Mental processes do not arise solely as a result of isolated brain functions or even as combinatory processes within the body. Investigations reveal that, 'cognition is seen in part as a social phenomenon, distributed over the mind, body, activity and cultural context'… Applying this theory in conjunction with seselelame the mind-body duet becomes a quartet—the environment and particulars of the activity added— which combine to formally shape cognitive processes (Wray, 2016, p. 148, quoting Iyer, 2002, p. 389, 391).

The quartet analogy helps to capture *seselelãme*'s ethos in part by skipping over the tired, old "mind-body split" problem and blending activity and cultural context into the mix. Call it "enacted cognition" if you wish, but this term remains overly mentalistic. We want to suggest that when it comes to *seselelãme* what we are encountering is not a mentality but rather an ecosystem. By this we mean a complex network, an interconnected system, where interaction of living and non-living entities take place. Elsewhere we have described the "porosity of selves" characteristic of social life in Aŋlɔland (Geurts, 2003, p. 170; 2011, p. 27). There is an intercorporeal dimension to Aŋlɔ selfhood which is an interpersonal manifestation of the larger, organic or biotic quality of *seselelãme*. We are reminded here of Adzogble's claim that "to be an existent thing, in Aŋlɔland, is to shuffle persistently between the physical and the spiritual" because "actuality" in this context is "born out of interactivity" (2022, p. 13). The description of Nani responding to musical questions serves as an example of his porosity in feeling the

audience ("reading them kinaesthetically"), and dancing out his energy to evoke their surprise. As noted previously, Fiagbedzi explains that *aɖaŋu* or "art" suggests cleverness or skill and Nani clearly exhibits this in his performance. But Fiagbedzi's expert account also reveals that "in Eʋe thought all creation, natural or man-made, must exhibit some form of art" (p. 4). An ecosystem understanding of *seselelãme* helps us better appreciate the emphasis on interactivity that Adzogble claims to be foundational to Aŋlɔ ways of being-in-the-world.

4. Adornment and "Artful Motion"

We have seen how body sculpting and movement styles make the person in Aŋlɔland. So too does clothing. Kente cloth (or kete in the Eʋe language) is a centuries-old fabric still woven by hand throughout Ghana; historically it has been used by both genders to wrap parts of the body. For a "men's piece" of kete, twenty-four strips of cloth are sewn together resulting in a twelve by eight-foot rectangle of fabric. This is then donned in a toga-like style. A nearly eighty-year-old gentleman called Mr. Atsatsa spoke at length about his experiences wearing Aŋlɔ-Eʋe *kete* (in an interview recorded by Geurts in 2003 and reported in Geurts & Adikah, 2006). He explained that over the course of his life he consistently wore Western style trousers and shirt when working on the farm, but when he attended a public meeting, funeral, wedding, or outdooring of a baby, he put on *kete*. It made him feel "very fine, confident, and comfortable." For decades he wore a piece called *Takpekpe le Anloga* (which translated literally means: meeting at Aŋlɔga) and he described this fabric as "almost blending into him" or fusing with his body and spirit.

Mr. Atsatsa's story took a deeper turn as he went on to reflect on the relationship between his kete attire and his *ahanonko* (drinking name). He described how when going out in public in *kete* his experience was like that of having an added personality – especially as colleagues and friends, upon seeing him dressed this way, would call out *Katako gako, adawato tsitsixoxo be yeale da kple asi* (A very old mad man tries to catch a snake with his bare hands, yet when he catches it, he will find himself bitten), his drinking name. It bears noting that in traditional Aŋlɔ society, young men were bestowed with lengthy, proverb or riddle-like appellations that reference some unique aspect of their spirit or personality. This explains why wearing *kete* cloth, not trousers, elicited powerful interactions prompted by the pronouncement of his drinking name, and made Mr. Atsatsa feel that he was among friends, contemporaries, or people with whom he shared the same sentiment. He also explained that he felt kinaesthetically transformed when donning kete, experiencing a sense of self bordering on pomposity and an elevated gate: walking *fiazoli* or *agozoli* (a royal or majestic stroll). Being hailed in this way in turn triggered an elaborate, multisensory performance of an ahanonko greeting which included a ritualized handshake punctuated with snapping of fingers and a particular gaze (see Avorgedor, 1983, for an in-depth description and analysis of this form of greeting).

A second elderly gentleman, Mr. Zikpi, recounted similar feelings when reminiscing about his own *ahanonko*. He explained that upon hearing the very first word, *Kpitiga*, in his drinking name *Kpitiga abe yele Agbidime na fiawoo, nutsuwo tefe vovonatowo tui ehe xaxa*, (Kpitiga said he is in Agbidime for chiefs; men's thoroughfare, cowards walked through and got stuck), he would "feel a peculiar kind of power" welling up within his body. Mr. Zikpi explained that these poetically structured and evocative drinking names prepared the way for a man to rise to any challenge; it enabled a man to tap into his inner spirit and strength. He went on to relate how, even if you were in the midst of eating, and about to put a morsel of food in your mouth, if someone called out your *ahanonko* you had to put the food down (i.e. cast aside anything superficial) and respond with the ritualized handshake and snapping of fingers. Mr. Atsatsa

shared a similar sentiment. He said that any time someone declared his *ahanonko*, it was like *Eda fu tame nam* (it felt as if feathers were being plucked from my skin; it raised the hair on my back). These accounts of the interactivity resulting from adornment lend further support to our characterization of *seselelãme* as an ecosystem. Here, sensible objects (the *kete* cloth), kinesthetic displays, the porosity of individuals, and poetic pronouncements are all intricately interwoven in a complex tapestry.

As our final example of *atsyoɖoɖo* or adornment we turn to a diasporic setting, where Komabu-Pomeyie considers her own use of *kente* while living in the United States. She is a native of Agbozume which is a major Eʋe center for weaving and she herself grew up learning to create strip-woven cloth. Approaching adornment differently than the gentleman who reported a sense of pomposity when he donned his cloth called "meeting of the Aŋlɔs" (*Takpekpe le Anloga*), Komabu-Pomeyie dresses modestly using small pieces of classic Eʋe fabric to tie her hair or drape over her shoulder. But these fashion statements are neither minor nor hastily made. She often takes three days to design and perfect her outfit and reflects that adornment takes "dedication, time, and some financial expense – from head to toe." The upshot, though, is that as one of the few Africans in her local environment, Komabu-Pomeyie feels that the cloth keeps her connected to a rich history and cultural aura. This approach to adorning the body creates emotional and physical feelings of pride, respect, uniqueness, and honor – as she senses that her entire society is there alongside her. Summing up, she professed that this careful and deep approach to adornment makes her "*feel extraordinaire.*"

5. Conclusion

In *The End of the Cognitive Empire: the Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) presents a critique of the "abyssal line" that separates and privileges the epistemologies and socialities of the global North over those of the global South, and excoriates the way in which this privileging of the one over the other serves to legitimate disregarding or dismissing the latter in the name of science. African somaesthetics is one such epistemology (and sociality) of the global South. In this paper, we have sought to enucleate the multiple meanings and inner workings of the Eʋe phrase *seselelãme*, and arrive at an appreciation of the emphasis on shapeliness, flexibility or balance, artful motion and interactivity within this "foundational schema" (Shore, 1996). We have also brought out the connection between this bodily disposition and the Aŋlɔ understanding of nature as "holistic and interactive." There is a profound emphasis on interactivity and interdependence. As Adzogble affirms: "For the preservation and protection of life, all entities in the physical domain, as well as the spiritual, have to interact perpetually" and this is "paramount for the balance of all life forces" (Adzogble, 2023, p. 12). Santos (2018, p. 32) would call this an "ecology of knowledges." At a time when planetary and social systems are completely out of balance, the "coming of age" of the distinctly Aŋlɔ-Eʋe epistemology of the south enucleated here, and as championed by the contributors to *African Somaesthetics*, cannot come soon enough.

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From the body as limit to the body as a platform:
Somaesthetic Pathways between Body Art and Posthumanism

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Abstract: *The paper sets out to explore the intricate concept of the incompleteness of the human body, tracing connections between earlier radical experiments of body art artists (from the 1970s to 1990s) and more contemporary explorations in posthumanism. Whereas the former set of experiments interrogated the physical and psychological points of resistance of the body, the latter are currently redefining bodily limits as sites of transformation, extension and empowerment. By way of this comparative study between early and more contemporary formations of body art, we explore the complex interplay between the perception and felt experience of finitude and transcendence for artists and audiences alike.*

Keywords: *Anthropopoiesis, Co-dividuality, Fictionality, Posthuman Corporeality, Cyborg Ontology, Somatic Interface.*

Introduction

The body has always been both the subject and the medium of artistic inquiry. It is the site where existence is affirmed and where mortality is confronted—an ever-present reminder of our impermanence. It has become a battleground where time, decay, and transcendence are negotiated. In contemporary art, the notion of the human body as an incomplete and evolving entity has undergone significant transformation. Whereas it is understood that earlier body artists – i.e. those working between 1970s and 1990s – engaged in extreme performances to test the body's physical and psychological boundaries, revealing its vulnerabilities and inherent limitations, more contemporary artists, working in response to posthumanist ideas, envision the body as an expandable, mutable entity—one that can integrate biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and media enhancements so as to surpass biological determinism. Evidently, it is through use of enhanced media that contemporary artists are expanding human sensory and cognitive capacities and thus reconceiving the idea of the incompleteness of the human body as a "transitable" concept. In this paper, we compare and contrast the work of different international artists to trace the continuities and ruptures that shape the changing sense of corporeality in the practice of body art.

1. The Incompleteness Paradigm and the Post-Human Subject

In the 1990s, a new paradigm of incompleteness gained prominence in aesthetic, philosophical, and social science discourse. It argued that corporeality and subjectivity rest on a biological and symbolic plasticity, continuously shaped through interactions with nature, technology, culture, and communication. It was during this period that post-humanist and trans-humanist hypotheses began to emerge in scientific debate based on ideas of *fictionality* — i.e. the capacity to give apparently stable and defined forms to human plasticity. From this perspective, the human subject became a biopolitical configuration of symbolic formations shaped by somaesthetic and linguistic practices. The idea that humanity is a *dispositive* (Agamben, 2006), characterized by an *opening* (Agamben, 2002), which constantly places it in relation to itself and to alterity (natural, technological, and cultural-communicative) is made possible by complex *anthropogenetic* (Gehlen, 2010) and *anthropopoietic* (Remotti, 2013; Capello Mastroianni, 2024) processes. Fictionality thus becomes a key element within a culturalist paradigm that is expressed in the plural, always open, and indefinite construction of human beings, their social forms, and their representations (Borutti 2005; Remotti 1999, 2005; Mastroianni, 2024).

Modeling, making, unmaking, and constructing thus become the dynamics of the nature-culture dialectic. In its anthropopoietic dimension, this dialectic always leads to the emergence of new forms capable of embracing and transcending biological and symbolic data, incorporating technology, and producing new cultural forms situated within both singularities and collectivities. The formal shaping of the human—through this process of objectification and subjectivation that conforms to aesthetic characteristics and the paradigms of humanity circulating in a given social context—presents an essentially aesthetic, symbolic and linguistic dimension within a *nature-culture-technology dialectic* (Mastroianni, 2024).

From the Individual to the "Condividuo": A Relational Anthropology

In the years that followed this post-humanist turn, parallel moves in artistic and anthropological theory took hold. Nicolas Bourriaud (2010, p. 14), for example, proposed the emergence of "relational art": "an art that practices the sphere of human interactions and its social context as its horizon." Bourriaud's concern for a new "transindividual" Subject in artistic practice mirrored the preoccupations of Marilyn Strathern and others in developing an *anthropology of the person* (Remotti 2009, Capello 2016). Synthesizing ideas of personhood found in Melanesian cultures, Strathern (1988) argued that a different conception of the subject circulates in that region, one that does not view the subject as an individual but as a bundle or node of constitutive social relations — a "dividual" being that incorporates the social rather than opposing it (Strathern, 1988). It is from the convergence of these two figures of relational thought that Francesco Remotti (2019) developed his notion of the *condividuo* (Co-dividual or shared-dividual). This term refers both to the transindividual space between and within Subjects. In this sense, anthropology—the study of relationships—positions itself as the knowledge of the *condividuo* (Capello, Mastroianni, 2024).

The Body in Contemporary Art: From Boundary to Platform

Seeing the person not as a single, autonomous entity, but as a composite of relational influences or *condividuo* is, we argue, the difference that marks a shift in the practice of Body Art (at some point in the 1990s) from boundary to platform. Whereas Body Art artists between the 1970s and

1990s understood "the body" as a raw, finite and individuating organism or *boundary,* a shift in artistic practice began to shape a more contemporary sense of "the body" as an open, mutable *platform*. No longer a bounded vessel, "the body" in contemporary art characterizes a dynamic and hybrid interface between personal experience and world; the site, one might say, of a new kind of personhood. To demonstrate this shift, in the following four sections, we use a unifying theme to contrast and compare the work of "earlier" with more "contemporary" body artists. In moving between these different examples, we argue that we begin to perceive a shift away from "the body" as a marker of endurance and vulnerability to one that regards it as a condition of possibility, open to interrogating its incompleteness through exploring new biological, social, political relations.

2. The Body as a Challenge to Mortality

Historically, mythological figures such as Gilgamesh exemplify the ancient human struggle against mortality. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the eponymous king embarks on a desperate quest for eternal life following the death of his companion Enkidu. His journey leads him to Utnapishtim, the Sumerian Noah, the only human granted immortality by the gods, only to learn that death is an inescapable facet of the human condition.

Similarly, Sibilla Cumana, who, according to Roman mythology, was bestowed immortality but not eternal youth, presents another paradigm of corporeal decline. Her fate—gradual disintegration until she is reduced to mere voice—symbolizes the paradox of immortality without preservation. This concept resonates well with transhumanist and posthumanist speculations on longevity, such as Ray Kurzweil's advocacy for cryonics and artificial intelligence, as a means to preserve consciousness beyond biological decay.

Abramović, Burden, De Dominicis: Endurance, Violence, and the Quest for Immortality

The tension towards the limits of the body, which sinks into the mythological cradle of human destiny, is echoed in the work of artists like Marina Abramović, Chris Burden and the Italian artist Gino De Dominicis, who stand at opposite poles of this exploration, yet their inquiries converge on the same essential question: Can art defy mortality?

Abramović, for example, shaped by the tensions of socialist Yugoslavia and later by the trauma of the Yugoslav wars, confronts mortality through performances that echo the volatility of life in conflict zones. In one of her seminal performances, *Rhythm 0* (1974), Abramović offered her body as an open canvas to the audience, placing 72 objects at their disposal, from a rose to a loaded gun. As the hours passed, the performance escalated from tentative engagement to acts of increasing violence—her body transformed into both a receptacle for aggression and a symbol of resistance. *Rhythm 0* (1974) becomes a war-like theatre where the body is surrendered to external forces, suspended between survival and annihilation.

Marina Abramović, Rhythm 0 (1974), https://art21.org/gallery/marina-abramovic-artwork-survey-1970s/#2

Chris Burden, Shoot, 1971, https://gagosian.com/artists/chris-burden/

Likewise, Chris Burden challenged the limits of bodily endurance and the intersection of violence and spectatorship. Working in the United States during the Vietnam War era, he staged his body in the crosshairs of America's gun culture. His best-known work, *Shoot* (1971), involved asking a friend to shoot him in the left arm from a distance of about sixteen feet (5 m) with a 22 rifle. The act of being shot with a 22 rifle encapsulates both the randomness and the normalization of violence in a society where weapons are easily accessible and underscored the precariousness of human existence, in the face of military and systemic power, and in an American society where guns are in the free market.

De Dominicis approaches death from a philosophical and spiritual perspective rooted in the classical Greek tradition. His works reject the inevitability of death, proposing immortality as an attainable reality—aligning himself with mythological quests for eternal life. His *Lettera sull'Immortalità* (1970) challenges the linearity of time and proposes physical immortality as an attainable reality rather than a mythological fantasy. His *Calamita Cosmica* (1989), a colossal skeletal figure with an enigmatic nose, exists as a paradox—both an emblem of death and a refusal of it. In invoking Sumerian mythology, particularly the figure of Gilgamesh, De Dominicis aligns his vision with ancient quests for eternal life, suggesting that the dissolution of the body is not an inevitability, but rather a failure of imagination, opening at the process of permeability between life and death as an osmotic process of becoming.

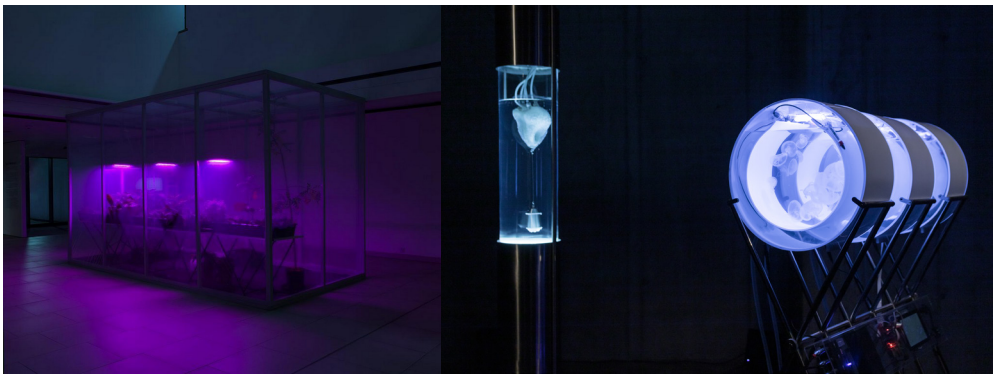
Taken together, Abramović, Burden, and De Dominicis illustrate distinct but intersecting approaches to the confrontation with death: one forged in the crucible of political conflict, another shaped by the violent contradictions of American society, and a third grounded in mythological and philosophical defiance. Abramović's and Burden's bodies, standing at the threshold of destruction, embodied the inevitability of mortality—an unfinished, threatened existence, perpetually at risk. Through endurance and exposure, they stage the body as a site of vulnerability, often put their life in danger, testing the boundaries of what was acceptable as art and the role of the audience as observer and participant, giving the audience the opportunity to push their bodies to the limits of danger. Their pieces, blurring the line between performance and real-life harm, question the ethical dilemmas of participation in acts of violence and the complicity of the viewer in acts of destruction. If they reveal mortality as an inescapable force, implicit in life and violence of human nature, De Dominicis, in contrast, seeks to deny the constraints of time altogether, constructing an artistic mythology in which the body, untouched and immutable, resists decay. De Dominicis stages immortality as an act of defiance, not exposing the body's frailty but transcending it entirely. From a different perspective, they experience first-hand the violence inscribed in the socio-political susceptibility of reality.

Dewey-Hagborg and Šebjanič: Reconfiguring Life with Advanced Technology

In more contemporary art formations, mortality becomes an issue to be techno-scientifically reconfigured rather than an endpoint. Artists such as Heather Dewey-Hagborg and Robertina Šebjanič, for example, extend their imagination through the lens of biotechnology. In their work, the body is no longer a fixed entity but a malleable, data-infused form, susceptible to genetic engineering, synthetic biology, and technological augmentation.

Dewey-Hagborg's *Spirit Molecule I and II* (2019) examines the persistence of identity beyond death, using DNA as a posthuman archive. In collaboration with the artist Phillip Andrew Lewis, she proposes an intimate, radical act of commemoration: the transformation of a loved one's genetic material into a psychoactive plant, one that could be ingested, allowing for a continued connection beyond the physical demise of the body. In contrast to Abramović's and Burden's

exploration of bodily finitude, Dewey-Hagborg speculates on its extension—on the possibility that mourning might not require letting go, but rather, a reconfiguration of bodily presence in an other post-human species.



On the left: Heather Dewey-Hagborg and Phillip Andrew Lewis, Spirit Molecules I, 2018, (https://deweyhagborg.com/projects/spirit-molecule);

On the right: Robertina Šebjanič, Aurelia 1+Hz. Proto viva generator (2019). NewArtFoundation. Photo Miha Godec

Echoing this, Robertina Šebjanič positions the body within a broader posthumanist dialogue, where life is no longer exclusively bound to human temporality but can be reimagined through interspecies connections and biological reinvention. In *Aurelia 1Hz – Proto Viva Generator* (2014), a sound performance and installation, Šebjanič explores the biological and symbolic resonance of *Aurelia Aurita*, a jellyfish species with remarkable regenerative abilities, often considered biologically immortal. The work immerses the viewer in an audiovisual ecosystem where the rhythms of these primordial creatures, translated into low-frequency sounds, merge with human perception, evoking a non-human temporality beyond the constraints of human lifespan, and remind us that human survival is deeply dependent on marine ecosystems, such as corals and plankton, which sustain life on Earth by producing oxygen. By engaging with scientific research on *Aurelia Aurita*'s regenerative properties and their implications for medicine, *Aurelia 1Hz* challenges anthropocentric notions of decay and mortality, suggesting that if the body is not inherently doomed to decay, what does that mean for our concept of existence? Do we have to experience death to have an idea of finitude? The artist suggests that existence and finitude can be reimagined through biological reinvention and interspecies kinship, behaving *the dividual self*.

Placed in dialogue with literary and mythological figures such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*—the archetype of the scientist obsessed with defeating death—these works illuminate the ethical dilemmas of challenging biological determinism. While Frankenstein's creation is condemned to suffering, Dewey-Hagborg and Šebjanič envision new forms of persistence, where the body does not escape death but transforms through other species and systems. If De Dominicis imagined an immortal body, untouched by decay, Dewey-Hagborg and Šebjanič envision a body that persists through transformation—shifting, expanding, and reshaping itself to meet the demands of a changing world.

From this perspective, Dewey-Hagborg's exploration of genetic endurance and Šebjanič's reconfiguration of marine life can be read both as participating in and resisting biopolitical regimes of control. Dewey-Hagborg's transformation of DNA into plants and Šebjanič's marine collaborations exemplify a profound reconfiguration of kinship. As Janet Carsten (2004) argues, kinship is not restricted to genealogical lineage but can be constituted through shared substances, practices, and environments. In these artistic explorations, kinship extends across species boundaries and into technological domains, suggesting that DNA, data, and marine organisms may all participate in a broader network of relationality.

This expanded understanding of relatedness aligns with what Vincent Mosco (2004) describes as the "digital sublime," the aura of transcendence often surrounding digital and biotechnological practices. Yet, rather than reinforcing a narrative of inevitable progress, both Dewey-Hagborg and Šebjanič interrogate this aura, exposing the promises and risks embedded in technological mediation. Their works insist that technological interventions in life are never neutral but politically situated, bound to regimes of surveillance, commodification, and control. In this regard, their practices resonate with Donna Haraway's seminal contributions. Haraway (1985) dismantles the humanist notion of the bounded, self-sufficient individual, proposing instead the cyborg as a hybrid figure shaped by the entanglements of biology, technology, and culture. The cyborg, for Haraway, resists both essentialist humanism and dystopian technophobia, offering instead a politics of affinity grounded in interconnection and coalition.

Haraway's later work, Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™ (2018), further elaborates this critique by introducing figures such as "FemaleMan," which interrupts the fantasy of a universal, masculine subject, and "OncoMouse™," a genetically engineered, patented animal that epitomizes the commodification of life. These tropes reveal both the risks and the resistances inscribed in biotechnological capitalism, while simultaneously opening imaginative pathways for rethinking kinship, identity, and embodiment beyond anthropocentric and market-driven logics.

3. The Human Body as a Trans-Species Being

Donna Haraway's (2016) reflections on pigeons are emblematic: creatures both natural and technological, urban companions and military messengers, pigeons embody the blurred status of beings that are at once animal and cyborg, mediators of human-nature-technology entanglements. From this perspective, the human body itself must be rethought as a porous and transitional entity: not a closed container of identity, but a living ecosystem where stories, memories, and mutations intersect. The human body becomes a bridge and an interface, open to transformations that unsettle traditional notions of individuality and species belonging.

In the 1970s, artists such as the Cuban-born Ana Mendieta and the German artist Joseph Beuys explored this metamorphic potential by placing the body in direct dialogue with natural elements. Mendieta's earth-body works grounded the female form within soil, blood, and ritual, while Beuys incorporated animals and organic matter into his performances, staging acts of healing and symbolic transformation. In both cases, the human remained distinguishable from the non-human, yet the threshold between them was probed and destabilized.

Since the 2000s, by contrast, artists including Matthew Barney, Pierre Huyghe, and Moon Ribas have intensified this crossing of boundaries. Barney's mythological hybrids, Huyghe's living ecosystems, and Ribas's cyber implants present bodies that no longer simply converse with the natural world but actively absorb, hybridize, and extend it. This is no longer a dialogue but a contamination, a fusion where distinctions between human and non-human dissolve entirely.

In fact, Rosi Braidotti's notion of the nomadic subject is crucial for understanding this shift. *In The Posthuman* (2013), she dismantles the ideal of the bounded individual, proposing instead an identity in motion—fluid, relational, trans-species. In her chapter *Life Beyond Species, she cites George Eliot: "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence*" (p. 63). For Braidotti, beneath the surface of urban civilization lies the "roar" of cosmic vitality, a Spinozist indicator of matter's energy, which inscribes itself within bodies and societies alike. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, this material vitalism conceives of matter as both unified and complex, propelled by a desire for self-expression and ontological freedom.

The key question, then, is what forms of subjectivity and subjectivation emerge from this post-anthropocentric framework? Braidotti articulates a zoe-centered egalitarianism, which rejects the binary distinction between *bios* (life reserved to humans) and *zoe* (life more broadly, non-human and inhuman). Posthuman subjectivity is redefined as part of a continuum of vital forces, desacralizing "human life" as unique and repositioning it within broader ecologies.

Yet this post-anthropocentrism is not without contradictions. As Braidotti notes, in a global neoliberal economy, no animal—or human—is exempt from commodification: all forms of animal life are inscribed within circuits of exchange, exploited with equal intensity across scientific experimentation, biotechnological agriculture, pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries. Here, the body (human and non-human alike) is simultaneously the site of vitality and the object of instrumentalization. Melinda Cooper (2008), Australian sociologist and political theorist, highlights this paradox by examining how, in biocapitalism, life itself is put to work at the microbiological and cellular level. The distinction between natural reproduction and technological invention becomes blurred, as biological processes are directly integrated into neoliberal logics of accumulation. New biological theories of growth, complexity, and evolution are thus entangled with economic discourses of scalability, innovation, and risk.

Jean-François Lyotard, in *L'Inhumain*, similarly stresses that resistance to the techno-capitalist reduction of subjectivity lies precisely in the *inhuman* dimensions of the self: its non-unitary, non-rational, indeterminate nature. For Lyotard, it is the instability of boundaries—between genders, races, and species—that opens possibilities for resisting techno-governmental control and imagining alternative futures for embodiment. It is in openness to inhumanity—to difference, to the uncodifiable event—that the possibility of a truly plural, heterogeneous, and open-to-becoming posthuman body unfolds. It is precisely this internal inhuman—the site of the sublime, the unpredictable, the non-codifiable—that resists total assimilation into biopolitical regimes. Art, in Lyotard's view, becomes essential: it renders perceptible the incommensurable, allowing us to experience the differend between languages and the eruption of what cannot be fully expressed. Taken together, Haraway, Braidotti, Cooper, and Lyotard map the contours of a posthuman, trans-species ontology: one in which the body is no longer a fixed biological container but a relational process, traversed by cosmic energies, political economies, and interspecies entanglements.

The artistic practices—from Beuys and Mendieta to Huyghe, Ribas, and beyond—materialize these theoretical trajectories, making visible the body's ongoing transformation into a trans-species being. In constructing this artistic path, the research intentionally follows a transversal gaze—geographically, culturally, and conceptually—bringing together artists from diverse latitudes and sociopolitical contexts to challenge the speciesist divide.

Mendieta and Beuys: The Body as a Dialogue with Nature

On the left: Ana Mendieta, Documentation of Tree of Life, 1976 (Old Man's Creek, Sharon Center, Iowa), 35mm color slide (https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Ana-Mendieta-Documentation-of-Tree-of-Life-1976-Old-Mans-Creek-Sharon-Center-Iowa_fig1_348306764) / On the right: Joseph Beuys, I Like America and America Likes Me, 1974. Photo credit Caroline Tisdall. Copyright DACS (2005). (https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Joseph-Beuys-I-Like-America-and-America-Likes-Me-1974-Photocredit-Caroline-Tisdall_fig1_263449016)

In Ana Mendieta's research, transformation is a return, a dissolution into the natural cycle: the body is an echo of the earth, a memory of the primordial forces that pass through it. Her art calls forth the non-human that constitutes us, the animal and vegetal realms that inhabit us, a continuity that modern thought has severed. In her *Siluetas*, the body is not a separate entity but an imprint left in mud, sand, and stone—a shadow returning to the landscape as if it had never left. In *Tree of Life* (1976), Mendieta covers her body with mud, becoming tree, root, and bark, embodying the myth of an original unity between human and vegetal life. In *Blood Feathers* (1974), the body is transfigured through blood and feathers, evoking the animal, the sacred, and the wild dwelling within the human.

If Mendieta merged with the earth, Joseph Beuys sought an encounter with the animal—its gaze, its enigmatic and intuitive presence. In *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), Beuys spends three days in a cage with a coyote, a totemic animal symbolizing wisdom and rebellion. Their encounter becomes a ritual, a slow dance in which the human body seeks a form of communication that bypasses language, relying instead on gesture, energy, and presence. Beuys does not merely observe the animal; he allows himself to be observed, studied, accepted, or rejected. The body becomes a space for dialogue that transcends species barriers—not a fusion, but a confrontation, an attempt to recognize oneself in the other. The coyote is not a symbol but an interlocutor; Beuys' art is not representation but a direct experience of transformation.

Huyghe, Ribas: Body, Myth and Species Boundaries

The French artist Pierre Huyghe takes the discourse even further, dissolving the human body

into the landscape after a nuclear disaster, and intertwining it with other life forms. In his installations, humans, animals, plants, and machines coexist as a single organism, an ecosystem without a center. *Human Mask* (2014) is a haunting meditation on the dissolution of human identity, the artificiality of performance, and the fragile line between species. It opens with a pan of a deserted streetscape near Fukushima, Japan, which was devastated by natural and human-made disasters in 2011.

Pierre Huyghe, Untitled (Human Mask), 2014. Film, color, stereo sound, 2 min. 66 sec. Running time: 19 min. © Adagp Paris. Courtesy the artist: Marian goodman Gallery, New York; Hauser & Wirth, London; Esther Schipper, Berlin; and Anna Lena Films, Paris. https://lesoeuvres.pinaultcollection.com/en/artwork/untitled-human-mask

The film, shot in an abandoned restaurant in Japan, features a monkey wearing a traditional Noh mask and a wig, wandering through the deserted space. The monkey moves through the post-apocalyptic setting as if trapped in an endless theatrical loop, performing for no one, embodying a hollow humanity that persists even in emptiness. The monkey, trained to serve customers, repeats automated, purposeless gestures, caught in a cycle of movement that no longer has meaning in the absence of human presence. The mask, a human artifact, paradoxically strips the figure of its humanity rather than granting it. Instead of revealing, it conceals—what lies beneath is not quite human, nor entirely animal. The animal does not merely mimic the human—it becomes an uncanny, liminal being, an entity suspended between species, between presence and absence, between ritual and instinct. What we perceive as 'human' may be nothing more than a series of programmed behaviors—a performance, just like the one the monkey enacts.

Through this piece, Huyghe questions our anthropocentric assumptions: if a monkey, masked and trained, can carry out the gestures of a human, where does the distinction between human and non-human truly lie? *Human Mask* dissolves these categories, offering a vision of a post-human world where identity is no longer stable, where the boundaries between species, nature, and culture dissolve into a silent, uncanny choreography. *Human Mask* does not only portray a desolate post-disaster landscape; it stages the collapse of human centrality within the wider ecology of life. In a world devastated by nuclear catastrophe, survival and continuity are not guaranteed by humans but by other species—i.e. organisms like fungi that thrive in irradiated environments, turning toxicity into conditions of possibility. This resilience reveals that life, as Braidotti argues, is always multiple, transversal, and in becoming: a zoe-centered vitality that exceeds human control and imagination. The posthuman condition thus compels us to rethink destruction not as an endpoint but as a threshold for other modes of existence. Amid

ecological ruin, new alliances and unexpected kinships emerge, reminding us that the future of life cannot be conceived through human exceptionalism, but through a recognition of the complex multiplicity of becoming-species together.

Moon Ribas, Take for example, the work of the Catalan artist Moon Ribas who sets out to radicalize the concept of trans-species existence, transcending the boundary between organic and technological. Both artist and cyborg, Ribas implanted sensors in her body, allowing her to perceive seismic movements of the Earth in real time. In *Waiting for Earthquakes she dances* earthquakes and moonquakes felt within her body, becoming a sensitive extension of the planet, an entity attuned to phenomena beyond human perception. In a similar vein, Manel De Aguas, a self-described "cyborg artist," expands trans-species identity by modifying his sensory perception. He developed and implanted weather-sensing cybernetic fins into his head, enabling him to perceive atmospheric changes through bone conduction. By integrating artificial organs that provide non-human sensory experiences, De Aguas embodies the transhumanist ideal of evolving beyond biological constraints, blurring the lines between species and technology.

Moon Ribas, Seismic garment. Pictures by Carlos Montilla.

Moon Ribas,Waiting For Earthquakes @ Hyphen Hub

Together, Ribas and De Aguas co-founded the Transpecies Society, an organization advocating for the recognition of new identities beyond traditional human classifications, promoting the development of new sensory perceptions and body modifications as a means of expanding human experience. The body is no longer solely human, nor solely animal—it is an extension of the world, a radar, a receptor of signals from other dimensions of existence.

Trans-species existence is not just an artistic theme but a fundamental condition of being: everybody has always been in mutation, in relation, in resonance with what is beyond itself. The future of the human body is not in a fixed definition but in continuous rewriting—a body that does not close itself off, but opens, that does not defend itself, but allows itself to be traversed, that does not merely exist, but becomes.

4. The Body as a Living Engraved Text

Throughout history, various cultural and artistic practices have conceived the body as a site of inscription, transformation, and revelation. In mythology, figures such as Attis and Dionysus embody the ritualistic act of self-mutilation as a means of spiritual transcendence. Attis, a priest devoted to the goddess Cybele, castrates himself in an ecstatic act of devotion, symbolizing the ultimate transformation of body and identity. Similarly, the Menads, followers of Dionysus, engage in violent, frenzied acts of self-inflicted wounds during Bacchic rituals, dissolving the boundary between pain and ecstasy, body and divinity.

Through blood, wounded flesh, and inflicted pain, body art artists have transformed the body into a symbolic battlefield, a living language that screams, whispers, opens and closes like

a wound that can never fully heal. In this perspective, self-injury is not mere destruction but revelation: an extreme gesture through which the body becomes the voice of visceral emotion, social denunciation, and an inquiry into the very meaning of identity and human limitation.

From Gina Pane's martyrdom to Ana Mendieta's blood-stained memory, from Franko B's ritualistic sacrifice to Stelarc's technological hybridization and Donnarumma's sonic experimentation, the body emerges as a living engraved text through which the code of organic life can be reinscribed; a surface where the possibility of rewriting one's destiny is at stake. To self-injure in body art is an act of bodily writing, a way to make visible what often remains buried: structural violence, individual pain, the fragility of the collective body, its ability to resist. To self-injure in cyborg art is an act of radical becoming—a way to carve new pathways beyond the limits of gender, species, and biology itself.

Pane, Mendieta, Franko B: The Skin as a Vessel of Suffering and Collective Human Fragility

Gina Pane, Azione Sentimentale, 1973 (Details). Available via license: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Figura-1-Gina-Pane-Azione-Sentimentale-1973-Detalle-Recuperada-de-http_fig1_314027727.

The Italian artist Gina Pane is one of the most emblematic figures of body art, and her performance *Azione Sentimentale* (1973) represents one of the most significant examples of self-injury in the context of body art. In this performance, Pane dressed in white, carrying a bouquet of red roses. The initial gesture of removing the thorns from the roses and thrusting them into her arm, followed by the act of replacing the roses with some white ones and cutting the palm of her hand with a blade, becomes an act of self-awareness through physical pain. Pane's performance can be read as a reworking of the Catholic tradition of martyrdom, in which the body becomes the means to achieve a deeper understanding of one's own human existence and frailty. Each cut is an act of awareness, a mark imprinted on both flesh and the gaze of the observer. The blood

gushing from her body is not only a sign of physical suffering, but also a symbol of a spiritual and cultural quest.

Where Pane employs incisions, the Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta leaves imprints. *Body Tracks* (1974-1976) is a silent scream: bloodied hands slide down walls, leaving traces that evoke absent presences, disappeared bodies, histories of violence and memory. Mendieta stood against a wall in a sacrificial manner with her arms extended upwards and outwards in a "V". She then slowly slides down the surface and kneels, leaving behind the red trails of her blood-soaked hands as she stands up to look at the camera and step out of the frame. Drawing from the Afro-Cuban religion Santería, Mendieta uses animal blood and tempera paint to create imprints of her hands on white paper. Mendieta uses blood as a bridge between the individual and the collective, between the private dimension of suffering and the historical context in which it is inscribed. Her bloodied silhouettes, left on the ground, evoke femicide, the brutality of exile, the condition of those torn from their homeland. Yet, in this cruel gesture, there is also a form of belonging: the wounded body is not only a victim but also a root entwined with nature, reclaiming space, dialoguing with the ancestral memory of flesh and blood. If Pane's cuts are intimate revelations, Mendieta's gestures speak of absent bodies and ancestral memory. Blood becomes both wound and root, connecting the individual to the political, the body to nature, private suffering to collective belonging.

Ana Mendieta, Body Tracks, 1974-76. https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collections/artwork/untitled-blood-sign-2body-tracks

The Italian artist Franko B lets the blood flow, offers it, exposes it in all its raw materiality. In *I Miss You* (1999-2005), his naked body walks down on a catwalk stage, blood trickling down his skin, dripping onto the pristine surface, creating a map of suffering and desire. Franko B transforms pain into a language of emotion: the body is not only a battlefield but an open diary where blood becomes a tragic ink, a testimony of solitude, of love dissolving into emptiness. His performance is neither an act of heroism nor self-pity but a radical exposure of human vulnerability. The audience watches, bears witness, questions: how much suffering can we endure seeing? To what extent can the body become an archive of emotions without being annihilated?

Unlike Pane's ascetic gestures or Mendieta's historical inscriptions, Franko B's performance is a radical exposure of emotional fragility, a diary written in blood where the viewer is compelled to question their own capacity for empathy and endurance.

Franko B, I MISS YOU, performed in Malmo Sweden in November 2000. Ph. Manuel Vason Courtesy the artist

Stelarc and Donnarumma: The Skin as Biomechanical Interface for Revelation

The Cyprus-born Australian performance artist, Stelarc, takes the discourse on pain even further, turning it into a meditation on the mechanics of the body. Hanging in the void, held only by the tension of its own skin, the body becomes a pure instrument. There is no visible blood, no open wound—only the weight of the body swaying, the flesh stretched to its limits.

In his *Suspensions* (2012) performances, Stelarc suspends his body from hooks pierced into his skin, pushing the boundaries between pain, control, vulnerability, and transformation. The flesh becomes a support structure to be tested, expanded, and transformed, a platform for biomechanical experimentation. In this process, pain dissolves into the deliberate reconfiguration of the body as a modifiable entity—a structure to be hacked, altered, and pushed beyond the constraints of biology. Stelarc's claim that "the body is obsolete" aligns with Braidotti's vision of a subject that is always "becoming" embracing an affirmative posthumanism, one that moves beyond humanist nostalgia for bodily integrity and instead embraces relationality, fluidity,

and multiplicity. Obsolescence of the human body is not a deficiency but a condition of transformation.

Above: Stelarc. City Suspension, Above the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen 1985. Ph. Morten Schandorff.

Below: Stelarc. Moving / Modifying: Suspension for Obsolete Body. Espace DBD, Los Angeles 1982. Ph. Daniel J.Martinez

Unlike the flowing wounds of Pane, Mendieta, or Franko B, Stelarc's flesh is bloodless yet strained, turned into a biomechanical platform. Pain dissolves into experimentation: the body becomes obsolete, no longer defined by its organic limits but reconfigured as an interface for technology and posthuman becoming.

Together, these artists articulate a spectrum: from Pane's sacrificial awareness to Mendieta's political memory, from Franko B's emotional testimony to Stelarc's technological transcendence. Their works reveal how the wounded body can be a martyr, archive, diary, or instrument—always incomplete, always open to transformation.

Donnarumma, on the other hand, pushes the body into uncharted territory:At the heart of *Amygdala* is an artificially intelligent (AI) robot, shaped like a human-like limb and driven by biomimetic neural networks. These networks are not pre-programmed; instead, they function as iterative mathematical equations computed in real time, mimicking the sensorimotor system of animals. With surgical precision, the robot wields a knife to manipulate and sculpt a large piece of skin. Its work is repetitive, meticulous, and potentially infinite—its sole purpose is to learn and enact a ritual of purification known as "skin-cutting."

Marco Donnarumma, Amygdala. Ph. Paweł Jóźwiak.

Donnarumma offers the following insight into the conceptual underpinning of the artwork. As he explains (Donnarumma, 2019) the practice of skin-cutting draws from indigenous traditions across Papua New Guinea, Africa, and East Asia, while Christian and Muslim religions have historically enacted similar bloodletting rituals, albeit in different forms and conceptualizations. Through the experience of pain and bodily wounds, purification is achieved. For the artist, seemingly distant, purification rituals and AI technology share a crucial role in the politics of the human body. Throughout history, purification rituals have been one of the

oldest means of social categorization, marking inclusion and exclusion within a community. In a similarly perverse and dangerous way, the artist claims, today's participation in AI-driven algorithmic analysis—through private data and online behavior—now determines and regulates access to medical care, social welfare, and criminal justice systems. The body, once cut open in search of transcendence, is now sorted and dissected by data streams that govern its possibilities and exclusions. In *Amygdala*, this convergence is neither abstract nor metaphorical—it is materialised in the machine's relentless gesture. The knife does not simply lacerate skin; it inscribes the violence of categorisation, exposing the porous boundaries between ritual, technology, and biopolitics.

Donnarumma compels us to perceive suffering in an unprecedented way, to question what it truly means to feel pain. The body is no longer merely a surface to be lacerated; it becomes an interface of biodata, an organism whose privacy, spirit and intimacy have been violated, translating its wounds into a code that expands the perception of trauma beyond the visual dimension.

In 2022, David Cronenberg radicalized this concept in his film *Crimes of the Future* by envisioning surgery as the new form of eroticism and artistic expression. In a future where humans develop new organs and mutations, performance artists use surgical procedures as spectacles, reconfiguring their bodies as mutable landscapes for creation and fruition rather than destruction. In the post-organic body, media are not just more extensions of the human body (as Marshall McLuhan argued), they are the human body themselves. This transformation of the body into a medium had been already exemplified by the protagonist of *Videodrome* (1983), Max Renn, whose exposure to media waves mutates his body into a living extension of television technology. His torso develops a gaping wound that functions as both a VCR slot and a grotesque bodily aperture, illustrating how media not only influences but literally invades and reshapes corporeality.

5. The Body as Measure: Servant Arbitrator of Time and Information

The body is measure and boundary, prison and instrument, register and memory. The body bends under the weight of time but, at the same time, it becomes its tangible proof, the living testimony of its duration, its erosion, its reiteration in inexorable cycles. In the art of performance, the body becomes the metronome of existence, beating out the rhythms of waiting, of action, of resistance. Some artists make it the site of an extreme challenge to temporality, others conceive it as a malleable terrain, a fluid entity capable of bending time and space into an unprecedented perception of experience.

Since the 1980s, with Tehching Hsieh, and in the last decade, with Korean artists Moon & Jeon, distinct yet ultimately converging trajectories have interrogated the complex entanglement between the body and time. Hsieh imposes on his own body the condition of duration, forcing it to reiterate gestures and postures until it becomes the measure of repetition itself. Moon & Jeon, on the other hand, treat the body as a plastic unit, which does not limit itself to recording time but shapes it, curves it, reconfigures it. Two different ways of inhabiting time, of giving it form, of undergoing and transgressing it.

Tehching Hsieh: The Body as Captivity and Resistance

Tehching Hsieh, One Year Performance 1980 –1981. Punching the Time Clock. Photograph by Michael Shen © Tehching Hsieh. Courtesy the artist

Tehching Hsieh consigns himself to time like a condemned man who, paradoxically, chooses his own punishment. His *One Year Performances* are extreme experiments in resistance and repetition, acts of blind devotion to the passing of hours, days and years. In *One Year Performance* 1980-1981, Hsieh lives locked in a cell, depriving himself of speech, interaction, and distraction. Repetition here becomes an exercise in survival: each day is the same as the previous one, each hour is diluted in a ruthless monotony. The act of existing is reduced to an exact calculation, an accumulation of minutes that settle on the skin, in the breath, in the posture of the body. Hsieh becomes a living measure of time, his body a silent witness to its advance, to its inexorability.

Hsieh is a slave to his rule, but this very slavery allows him to explore time in its purest essence. Time becomes a wall to touch with his hands, to feel in his bones, to measure through fatigue, boredom, deprivation. Repetition, then, is both an act of obedience and a gesture of revolt: repetition means resisting, it means affirming the body as an entity that does not allow itself to be dissolved in the indistinct flow of time, but challenges it, confronts it, crosses it to the end.

Moon & Jeon: The Body as Bending Time

If for Hsieh, time is a prison to be inhabited to the point of exhaustion, for Moon & Jeon it is a malleable substance, a wave that the body can ride, bend, redefine. *The Ways of Folding Space & Flying* is a multimedia installation by Korean artists Moon Kyungwon and Jeon Joonho, presented at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015). Inspired by Taoist philosophy and speculative sci-fi, the work explores humanity's desire to transcend physical and metaphysical boundaries. The project draws from two Korean concepts: *chukjibeop*, the hypothetical folding of space to enable instant travel, and *bihaengsul*, the supernatural ability to levitate and move across time and space. These ideas symbolize the Taoist pursuit of liberation from physical constraints, envisioning ultimate freedom. *The Way of Folding Time and Space* is a reflection on the possibility of escaping the linearity of time, of constructing an experience in which past, present and future are no longer rigid sequences, but elastic surfaces to be modelled. In their work, the body is not a passive witness of time, but a fluctuating architecture, a hologram that crosses different dimensions, superimposes itself, dissolves and recomposes. Repetition here is not an act of resistance but a strategy of transformation: to reiterate, repetition is not to suffer time, but to rewrite it, manipulate it, play with its possibilities.

MOON Kyungwon & JEON Joonho, The Ways of Folding Space & Flying, 2015, HD Film Installation, 10 min. 30 sec., Dimensions Variable © MOON Kyungwon & JEON Joonho.

Where Hsieh imposes a regime of exhausting repetition on the body, Moon & Jeon liberate it from this rigidity, immersing it in an environment where time-space is a fabric that can be woven in new ways with space in modelling. Their work invites us to think of the body not as a static measure of time, but as a means of experiencing it in new forms, where memory is no longer a linear repository of events, but a fluid stratification of sensations and images.

In the end, the question remains open: is the body really a prisoner of time, or can it somehow transcend it? Is it a fixed measure, a precise unit, or is it a variable capable of escaping the rigidity of duration?

6. The Body as Temporal Bio-Bank

The human body, in its biochemical dimension, is neither fixed nor self-contained—it is a porous, ever-changing system, a site of transformation where biochemical processes and thresholds are continuously negotiated. Vito Acconci explored the anti-aesthetics of the bodily fluids, using them as art-making material with their extreme charge as social subject residues, markers of vulnerability and excess. In contrast, contemporary bio and multimedia artists like Marisa Satsia and Heather Dewey-Hagborg reframe the biochemical body as a dynamic platform—an interface between biology, technology, and political structures.

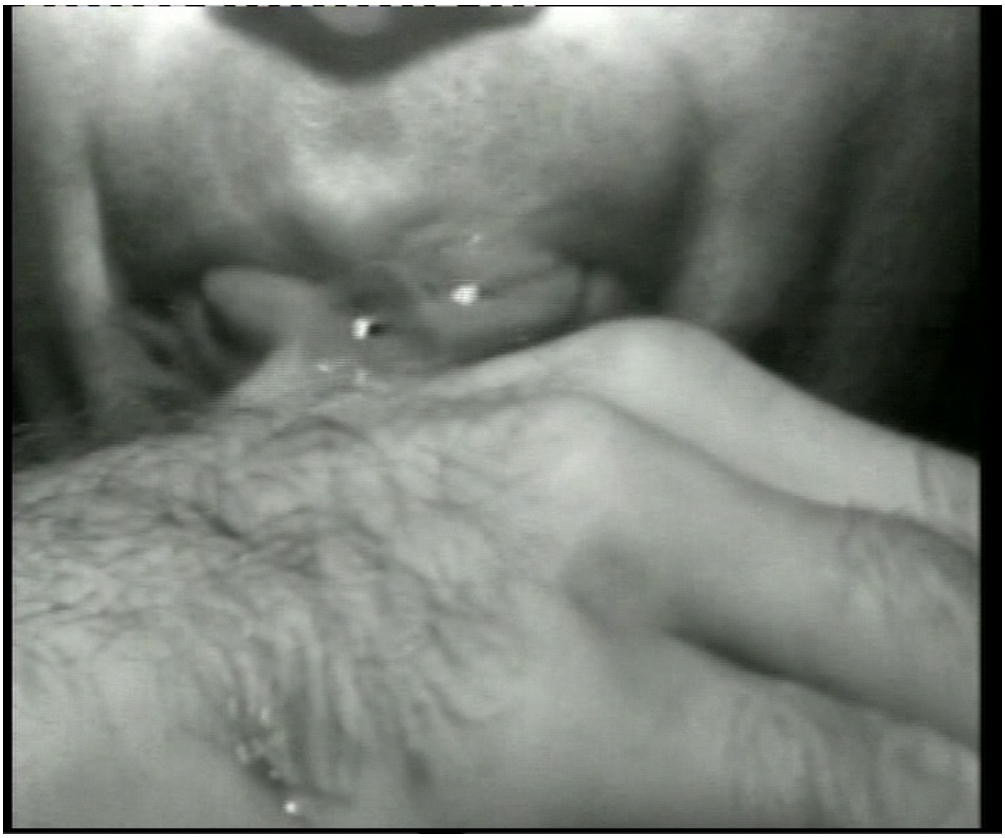
The works of these artists offer a critical reflection on how bodily fluids can be used as biological traces and how the body itself can be seen both as an object of surveillance and as a technological resource, pushing the discourse on self-surveillance and the right to privacy in a post-humanist context. The body is no longer simply a site of rupture and corporeal susceptibility but of expansion; its fluids, data, and processes are not just traces of decay but resources to be repurposed, manipulated, and shielded from biopolitical control.

Acconci, Satsia, Dewey-Hagborg: from Bodily Excess to Biopolitical Resource and Counter-surveillant.

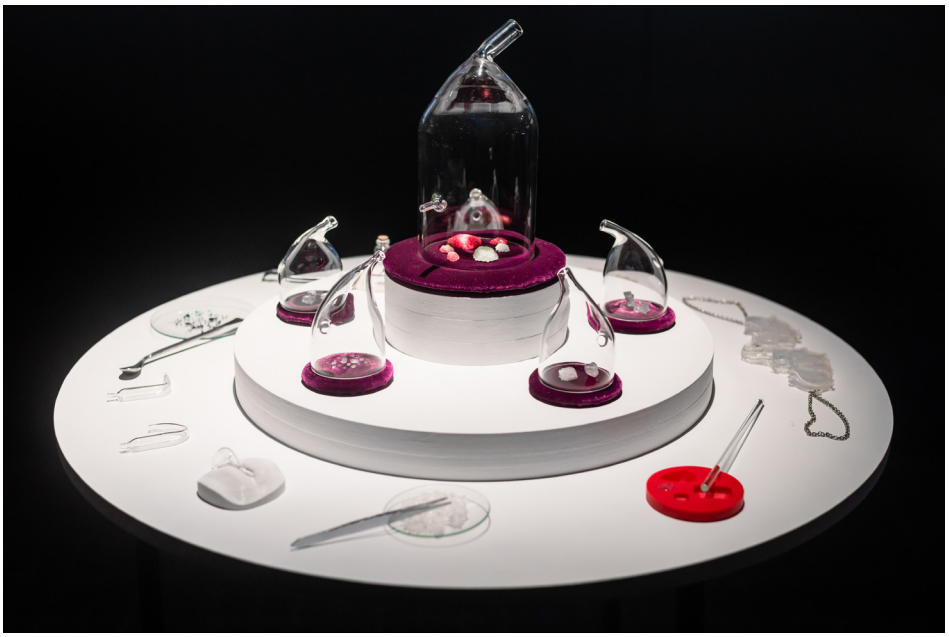
Vito Acconci's *Waterways 4: Saliva Studies* (1972) epitomizes the radical body art of the 1970s, in which the body was dissected in its most elemental functions. Waterways compromises four minimalist exercises in which Acconci explores the formal, visual and dynamic properties of saliva in a controlled performance situation. Using extreme close-ups and amplified sound to force the viewer into the space of his body, he experiments with his mouth as a container for saliva, holding it in his mouth as long as possible, trying to catch it in his hands. His exploration of saliva as waste—something expelled, overlooked, yet deeply intimate— reveals the body's unavoidable materiality, emphasizing its unpleasantness through its constant secretion, loss, and renewal.

The Cypriot artist, Marisa Satsia, by contrast, moves from this vision of bodily fluids as abject remains to an understanding of them as potential resources. Her *Open Source Body* (2017) reclaims saliva, urine, sweat, teardrops, intimate fluids as a site of knowledge, embedding it in a discourse of biotechnological empowerment. Here, body secretions are no longer a condition to be exposed as an anti-aesthetic and disgusting human condition, but an opportunity for biohacking and collective exchange. The artist invites us to rethink the human body as a material resource: urine can be rethought as a fertilizing medicine, plant fertilizer, cosmetics or biobricks. The body's bacteria and vaginal fluids can be used for the production of cheese bread and yoghurt. Other body fluids can serve as minerals for electronics and food sources for more than humans. Hair can also be repurposed as bio-textiles and so on. For Satsia, the human body is a biological product that can be shared and manipulated in an eco-friendly logic of tech recycling.

However, the project opens up ethical questions concerning the potential exploitation of the body as a commodity or resource for monitoring and control, which we are going to investigate.



Acconci, Waterways, 4 Saliva Studies, 1971 video, black & white, sound, 22'25", Courtesy Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli, Torino.



Marisa Satsia, Open Source Body - [Meta]fluidic gems and apparatus series. EMAP Group Exhibition. Told You It's Alive. Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana. 28.11.2023-2.2.2024. Photo by Hana Marn

Marisa Satsia, Open Source Body - [Meta]fluidic gems and apparatus series. EMAP Group Exhibition. Told You It's Alive. Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana. 28.11.2023-2.2.2024. Photo by Marijo Zupanov

Heather Dewey-Hagborg, Stranger Visions, 2013-14 https://deweyhagborg.com/projects/stranger-visions

Heather Dewey-Hagborg's work, in particular her projects *DNA Spoofing* (2012) and *Stranger Visions (2012-2013)*, address the use of body fluids and traces, such as saliva, hair, nails... as biological traces that can be used for surveillance and investigation. In *Stranger Visions*, Dewey-Hagborg collected DNA from discarded objects found in public spaces—chewing gum, hair, and cigarette butts—to generate 3D facial reconstructions of the unknown individuals who had left these traces. The project employs forensic DNA phenotyping, a controversial technology used to infer physical characteristics from genetic material, raising urgent ethical and political concerns about genetic privacy, surveillance, and the commodification of biological identity. By demonstrating how personal genetic data can be extracted and reconstructed without consent, *Stranger Visions* questions the growing role of biometrics and DNA forensics in law enforcement and state control, aligning with critiques of forensic biopolitics and genetic determinism.

As Caronia argues, the moment it is possible to alter the genome of another human being, we all become genetic cyborgs even if no one has altered our DNA. The social and investigative device *Forensic DNA Phenotyping* becomes a central device that creates new conditions in terms of the whole society. Once artifice appears on the horizon of the human species, there are no longer natural human beings. The preconditions for the technological explosion had already been given during the 18th and early 19th centuries with the birth of biopolitics, that is, with the appearance of a set of techniques for governing the population that no longer took the natural data as unchangeable and configured options for intervention on biological behavior, on the biology of populations." It is for these reasons that in *DNA Spoofing*, the artist proposes counter-surveillance strategies which alter and mask the way genetic information is read, manipulating and distorting biological data as a form of resistance against the abuse of genetic surveillance. Contemporary multimedia artistic practices become a means of resistance, developing new strategies of obfuscation and self-determination against biopower.

Conclusion

The incompleteness of the body, once seen as a marker of endurance and vulnerability, has been reconfigured in posthuman aesthetics as a condition of possibility. Whether through cyborg augmentation, genetic intervention, or speculative design, contemporary artists reimagine the body as an open system, capable of infinite reconfigurations. In doing so, they challenge not only the limits of the flesh but also the sociopolitical structures and four-dimensional structure of the universe. Artificial human beings, replicated or invaded, are the effect of a knowledge device, starting from Hoffman's automatons and Frankenstein, of a certain set of techno-scientific knowledge that has made possible, real, the transformation of a human body into a more than human being in time and space.

As we move further into the 21st century, the posthuman body emerges not as a fixed entity but as a site of ongoing negotiation—a dynamic interplay between biological materiality, technological mediation, and cultural inscription. It is within this space of becoming that art and theory as well as anthropological thought and practice converge, offering new ways of imagining what it means to be human in an age of unprecedented transformation.

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Somaesthetic Socio-Cultural Design for Disability:
Rethinking Body Marginality

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Abstract: *Although design anthropology, disability studies, and somaesthetics share overlapping concerns, they have rarely been explicitly linked. Each brings distinct strengths—practicality, inclusivity, and theoretical depth—that merit integration. This paper explores how design historically caters to a standardised body, side-lining marginalised bodies as 'unfit'. By juxtaposing these three frameworks, we argue for a reimagined design ethos that advances social justice through deeper embodiment. Using non-European case studies, we highlight the aesthetic, functional, and political potential of inclusive design grounded in diverse bodily experiences.*

Keywords: *design anthropology, disability studies, somaesthetics, social justice, design culture*

When Disability Meets Design Anthropology

We begin with two quotations that set the tone for the investigation that follows. In A sense for the other: The timeliness and relevance of anthropology, Marc Augé writes:

> *In its second meaning, le sens des autres refers to "the sense of the other"; that is, the others' "sense" or that which has meaning for others. Here the other is no longer object but subject, the generator of meaning: we are confronted with the sense that others, whether individuals or social groups, elaborate for themselves. But the two meanings go hand in hand, for in both cases the "sense" in question is social meaning, the constellation of symbolic relations instituted among and lived by people within a given social group, such that the group can in fact be identified as such by that constellation of relations. Anthropology is first and foremost the anthropological study of the others' anthropology. This is because no society exists that has not defined, more or less strictly, a series of "normal" -that is, instituted and symbolic-relations between generations, first-born children and their siblings, men and women, allies, lineages, age groups, free persons and captives, indigenous members and foreigners, and so on. An anthropologist's first task is to draw the map of this relative identity and otherness* (Augé, 1998: xv-xvi).

In Höök, K. (2018). *Designing with the body: Somaesthetic interaction design*, Kristina Höök writes:

> *The prevailing brainstorming methods focus on getting ideas out there rapidly by relaxing*

> *your reflective, critical mind. The drawback of this approach is a narrowness of design and a potential lack of aesthetic enjoyment on the part of the user. Soma design, on the other hand, provides an alternative to this aggressive, goal-oriented design process; it offers a slower, more thoughtful approach. Although a high-pressured industry will certainly resist such change, such a process would yield better products and create healthier and more sustainable companies in every sense* (Höök, 2018: xvii).

In his eloquent manner, Marc Augé highlights the importance of anthropology - "to draw the map of this relative identity and otherness". That is indeed a noble call, yet one that needs a flexible yet applicable definition of what this relative identity is and to which otherness we are referring. While noble and important, true and accurate, and even crucial for understanding cultural contexts, historically, anthropology was and, in a way, still is a part of the problem, as it struggles to define these concepts in a theoretical manner, leaving the practical, applicable outcome to adjacent disciplines. Though there are exceptions, such as the action anthropology of Sol Tax: see Watson, this volume, applied anthropology (and design anthropology, which affects our own research), remain the bulk of practice-oriented research. Surprisingly, nor has anthropology engaged with the intricate socio-cultural issues of disability and when it did, this was sporadic at best (Kasnitz and Shuttleworth, 2001a; Staples and Mehrotra, 2016). While the connection between anthropology and disability studies should have been a natural relationship, this has not been the case. Even so, in the last 10-15 years, anthropologists (mainly from medical anthropology) created fruitful links between the disciplines, albeit a minefield of critical theories involving the attempt to delink medicalization and disability (Ginsburg and Rapp, 2013). Two good examples of this integration lie when delving into the intricacies of embodiment or the disabled body, also relevant to somaesthetics and design. Hammer's (2021) focus on the disabled body in performance she interprets as a way of physical translation, resonates with our own interests in design for disability. Mainly, her focus on the choreography of motions curated between daily designed products and our body. Hammer's (2021) exploration of the disabled body in performance art, particularly its role in physical translation, between dancers and their wheelchairs, resonates with the idea that designed products should be better choreographed with the disabled body. Indeed, using the intermediary of designed products has been debated in STS and design theory relating to the agency of designers and objects alike (Gal and Ventura, 2023). As we shall see, the sensorial ability of harnessed technologies could affect disabled people's lives for the better. Another example of sensorial-focused disability anthropology is highlighted through what Friedner and Kusters (2020) call 'deaf anthropology', or the focus on the ways deaf people define themselves and navigate their surroundings. Indeed, customized technology which is crucial in disability and design, has had an immense influence on both deaf identity and sensorial ways of communication and being in the world. DeafSpace[1] , developed at Gallaudet University, offers ways of being and communicating through space and proximity, sensory reach, mobility and proximity, light and color, and acoustics. Another direction, crucial in our case, would be to use design to generate and ameliorate the affordances of everyday objects. While decolonizing disability studies might be a good approach to invigorate the dialogue between disability studies and anthropology (Staples, 2020), we would like to add to it the practice-based approach of design anthropology. While not perfect, it holds a crucial link between disability, it presents an important overture to disability and holds out the promise for the development of viable and practical solutions in addition to a holistic approach towards the body and the designed world.

1 https://infoguides.rit.edu/deafspace/principles

The dilemma of whether to define design anthropology (DA) as an applied or theoretical sub-discipline also affects its definition and its future. Trying to successfully define DA far surpasses the scope of this article (see Ventura and Mattozzi, forthcoming). In a nutshell, design anthropology is based on several key attributes: it deals with a deep understanding of individual and communal behavior and relationships; it has a temporal nature, meaning that like design it is aimed at the future; it is based on a combination of theory and practice; it is grounded in socially-oriented core values, including critical thinking, attention to people's actual everyday practices and values humanism, pluralism, and empathy; and finally, it is based on a collaborative and interpretive joint action between various stakeholders (Ventura and Bichard, 2016). The third point is extremely important when adding 'disability' to design anthropology. As in the broader disability study theories, critical thinking, vying for a better application of the body politic and helping people with their daily lives, offering an alternative to a 'clean' standard is crucial.

As Hamraie (2016) rightfully avers, universal (and inclusive) design practices, while welcome, offer practical and pin-point solutions while leaving political issues out of the debate. While disability studies are critical, universal design is occupied primarily with notion of 'good design'. Indeed, positioning socio-physical diversity as yet another marketing concept is not what we, or critical disability studies, are vying for. A major difference between our approach – socio-cultural design oriented critical disability studies – and universal/inclusive design is that the latter is market-oriented and engulfed in an imagined overall concept of 'good design'. What we believe in stems from a concept of social justice that views design as a critical practice with the aim of making our surrounding better for everyone - or "ameliorative" through and through (Shusterman 2012).

As in the case of the Augé quote (above), the second quote (from Höök) points to another lacuna relevant to our research which is the essence of mainstream commercial design, driven by profit, to focus on creating products for a "clearly-defined audience" – i.e., a profitable standard. This inherently excludes those whose needs fall outside an imagined standard, including many disabled individuals. The pressure to create marketable products often overshadows the needs of marginalized groups. Finally, somaesthetics, while offering valuable insights into the relationship between body, sensation, movement and aesthetics, lacks a crucial connection to practical outcomes. While it can shift perspectives, it doesn't necessarily translate those shifts into tangible changes in the material world for disabled people. Naturally, disability studies were supposed to tackle relevant practical issues relating to these issues, yet the discipline remains mainly theoretical, with other under-developed layers, one of which - the relevance of culture to disability - is discussed in a current publication (Das, Ventura and Dubey, 2025).

More importantly, even when accessibility is addressed by design practitioners, the deeper questions of core social, cultural, political, and economic values surrounding disability often remain unexamined. All three disciplines—design anthropology, somaesthetics and disability studies—fall short due to these distinct yet related limitations. They haven't effectively integrated theory, practice, and a robust set of core values to truly address the complexities of disability. Thus, we believe that two added attributes must be considered to transform these adjacent disciplines into a formidable and relevant contribution. First, core values, or ideology, should permeate into practice and education. This means reframing the relationship between disability and design and moving beyond mere functionality to consider the ethical and social implications of design choices. Second, social and cultural design can and should serve as the practical bridge between theory and action. By incorporating cultural understanding and social awareness into the design process, designers can create more inclusive and empowering solutions for disabled individuals. This approach can be disseminated and implemented through design professionals.

While "the other" has been and will be the focus of various studies and research in myriad disciplines, we wish to focus on perhaps the penultimate other. Echoing the classic Freudian approach, the other at the center of this article threatens our perception of self, our imagined identity and our deepest fears - of death, injury or plain ignorance. We wish to reframe our understanding of the disabled body through three quite relevant and important disciplines - (design) anthropology, critical disability studies and somaesthetics. By viewing this important topic through an alternative lens - a mixture of social design and cultural disability theory, we wish to offer another understanding of the standardized body and its implications.

Auge's exploration of the Other, and the differing norms and values they represent, is certainly compelling. However, the primary role of anthropology in this context, while valuable, is simply to foster acceptance. While indeed accepting disabled people in our daily lives is needed, a more active stance is imperative. Recognizing the existence of multiple embodied selves, and understanding that disability is not a personal failing or a source of guilt, was an important initial step. However, simply accepting this is not enough; we must actively advance this understanding. While design might have been the answer since it encompasses our visual and material surroundings, the answers or clear statements that design offers regarding disability are still lacking.

At first blush, anthropology was supposed to be the perfect mediation between the individual body, social norms and conventions, and the possibilities for another perception of disability. As a designated sub-discipline, the anthropology of the body focuses on topics such as embodiment, socio-cultural aspects of illness and disease, bio-power and more. While these issues are crucial for understanding our intricate relationship with our bodies, they lack the applicable layer we are looking for. Moreover, it seems as though linking the disabled body and anthropology was left for adjacent disciplines, such as critical disability studies.

Interestingly, Hartblay (2020: S26) proposes the term "disability expertise", which for her is "the particular knowledge that disabled people develop and enact about unorthodox configurations of agency, cultural norms, and relationships between selves, bodies, and the designed world. Disability expertise is a descriptive domain, that is, a container into which ethnographers might enumerate observations about how disabled people enact personhood and moral agency in diverse cultural settings." Her research on accessibility in Russia highlights exactly what we claim here, namely, that the intricate relationship between the personal disabled body, public sphere and agency can differ significantly in a specific socio-cultural context. In her research (Hartblay, 2017: 10), she found that "the idea of access becomes an object of desire, circulating beyond disability-advocacy communities." Hartblay's approach is ground-breaking and significant to both anthropology and disability studies as it challenges ableist assumptions, centers disabled voices and offers a new framework for understanding disability. Indeed, her research shows the ability or ineptitude of designers to serve as mediators for social change, or their reluctance to do so. Yet, it remains once more mainly theoretical. Hartblay shows in her ethnographic research (2017) the significant gap between accessibility defined as 'good design' by designers or official bureaucrats and yet function as 'bad design' for the people that actual use these solutions. This is where design, or design anthropology could serve as a meaningful additional layer. Following this assertion, Pullin (2017: 2-3) stresses a practice-oriented approach to disability, claiming that "I will use design for disability as a looser term, encompassing design for special needs, inclusive design, and other activities that challenge the division between designing for people with or without disabilities. Perhaps it would be more accurate to describe it as design against disability, as others have coined the term design against crime." This is an important addition since Pullin's approach is not only proactive but embedded with empathy-

related design strategies that vie to see disability as another layer to which designers must contribute. The addition of inclusive design for disabled people is important since design for inclusivity takes excluded communities into consideration while designing good products for everyone. Thus, the element of highlighting a person through specialized design is neglected in favor of inclusion in shared well-crafted products.

When you focus on these issues through the lens of design, this seems even more like a match made in heaven. However, while design anthropology has been a promising and innovative sub-discipline, it has had its share of problems. First, while the body is crucial in design, it is seldom present in design anthropology. Second, and important, is the decline of design anthropology in the last few years, in favor of adjacent sub-disciplines, such as social design (working with communities, social justice etc.) and design culture (material culture and design, vernacular design, etc.). While this process can be understood and developed (see Ventura and Mattozzi, forthcoming), the theoretical and applied layers of the dialogue between the individual non-standard) body, the socio-cultural sphere and design practice have been neglected. Into this crucial void, we would like to offer a possibility for discourse, both theoretical and practical.

Towards Another Body Model

As previously mentioned, the intricate relationship between disability studies and anthropology stems from the transition from medicalization to non-medicalization of disability (Kasnitz and Shuttleworth, 2001b). Indeed, the addition of (applied) design anthropology to critical contextualized disability studies steers this debate to more useful shores. Disability studies scholars have explored how disability challenges conventional notions of bodily normalcy and the ideal or average body. As Shilling (2012: 2) argues, many societies operate from a "somatocentric" perspective, placing the human body at the center, often making it a site of conflict and contention. Historically, the well-functioning body has been viewed as the primary marker of humanity and the epitome of health and strength. This perspective informs what Garland-Thomson (1997:7) calls "hierarchies of embodiment," where the disabled body is perceived as anomalous and inferior to a culturally valued ideal, deviating from the able-bodied norm. This "somatocentrism" cultivates a cultural ideal or "fantasies of identification" (Samuels, 2014) that positions the experiences of disabled individuals as abnormal, alienating, and exclusionary, leading to the devaluation of their identities. Quayson (2007) describes this unease that disability can evoke in able-bodied individuals as "aesthetic nervousness," a reaction to the recognition of bodily contingency when confronted with a non-normative body. This non-normative body can become the subject of "an aesthetics of human disqualification," a "symbolic process that removes individuals from the ranks of quality human beings, putting them at risk of unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death" (Siebers 2010: 23). Mass cultural spectacles, such as freak shows, and modernist art both contributed to this "aesthetics of human disqualification" by showcasing bodies considered undesirable, thereby reinforcing a sense of bodily integrity and vitality in the observer (Garland Thomson 1996, 1997; Davidson 2015). This cultural preoccupation with "enforcing normalcy," as explored by disability theorists such as Davis (1996), found reinforcement in the high art, design, and mass culture of the modern era, which often served as a kind of "prosthetic" validation of able-bodiedness.

However, disability transcends the physical body. As Shakespeare (2013) argues, disability is not merely a medical issue but a social construct. The physical body exists within a complex space intersected by psycho-emotional factors including internalized ableism. Besides, disability is also constructed by and within societal and cultural contexts, defined by able-bodiedness or the

perceived lack thereof. In this context, by considering individuals as "lacking" or "void," as noted by Wendell (1996), ableist narratives ascribe a variety of cultural meanings and negative values to the personhood of individuals with disabilities. These constructed categories grant power and legitimacy to the lives of certain individuals, such as those considered "bodily autonomous," while denying it to others, for instance, people with physical or sensory impairments. They subtly shape our understanding of the world, molding our perceptions and perpetuating societal biases in addition to reinforcing existing power imbalances. More interactionist approaches (signaling a shift from the earlier social constructivist ones) talk about disability as an identity that is "complexly embodied" (Siebers,2008). The theory of complex embodiment acknowledges that disabling environments significantly impact the lived experience of disability, but also recognizes that some aspects of disability, like chronic pain or aging-related issues, originate within the body itself. These bodily-derived disabilities must be considered alongside social factors in understanding disability. Complex embodiment posits a reciprocal relationship between social forces and the body, unlike the seemingly simplistic medical model for disability presenting the disabled body as a problem facing several (usually uninspired) solutions Complex embodiment proposes that social forces and the body mutually influence each other, a departure from the social model, which focuses solely on societal barriers, and the medical model, which predominantly views disability as an individual bodily defect. In other words, as we shall see, *critical disability jugaad* stems from a different understanding of the body, its functions and relations, in a specific socio-cultural context. Therefore, the material solutions propagated by the individual will hold deeper interpretative meanings and better prospects for success. Others discuss disability as a minority identity (Barnes, 2009) and also in affirmative or empowering ways – alternative discourses developed by disabled people who have developed a disability identity rooted in notions of power, respect and control (Cameron, 2007).

The field of Disability Studies has, thus, extensively dealt with ontological and epistemological discussions of the disabled body and has, broadly speaking, been engrossed in disentangling disability identity from stigma by redefining it in more positive ways. Today, Disability Studies is a burgeoning field that challenges traditional notions of disability. "Crip theory" reclaims disabled bodies, while "critical ableism studies" (Campbell, 2009) deconstructs ableist norms; queer disability studies explores the intersection of disability and LGBTQ+ identities (McRuer and Mollow, 2019) while posthumanist approaches redefine disability through biotechnology and environment (Braidotti, 2018). Scholars from the global South are also contributing, decentering Western perspectives and offering diverse, locally situated insights (Geurts, 2016).

While disability culture and representation have become well-established in fields such as visual and performing arts, theatre, film, and media studies over the last 30 years (see, for example, Millet-Gallant and Howie, 2017, 2022; Kupers 2003, 2011, 2014; Hadley and McDonald 2019), they remain inadequately addressed in design theory and practice. Discourse continues to be mired in (mostly) able-bodied design perspectives focused on how design intervenes for disability through adaptable design approaches, assistive design, inclusive design or universal design approaches and interventions. A major problem in design (especially in industrial design) is the value accorded to anthropometry. Defining anthropometric dimensions or a "standard" for human bodies presents a significant challenge, and is arguably an anathema, to truly inclusive design for disability. The very concept of a standard body inherently excludes the vast diversity of disabled, ageing and other "different" bodies. Even within a specific disability category, individuals exhibit a wide range of physical characteristics, proportions, and functional abilities. A "one-size-fits-all" approach based on average measurements or perceived "typical" body types will inevitably fail to accommodate the unique needs of many, if not most, disabled

individuals. Attempting to create a standard for disability ignores the fundamental principle that disability is not a monolithic experience. Such standardization can lead to designs that are not only uncomfortable and ineffective but also potentially harmful, further marginalizing disabled people and reinforcing the notion that their bodies are "deviant" from the accepted norm. True inclusive design must embrace the inherent variability of human form and prioritize personalized solutions that cater to the specific anthropometric dimensions and functional requirements of each individual. Design should aim to accommodate a wide range of users, not just the "average" person.

An interesting approach, suggested by the activist Piepzna-Samarasinha (2022), accentuates the unique position in which we currently find ourselves. In an innovative voice, she stresses the importance of disabled knowledge not for disabled people, but for the future of humankind. Looking at the heap of calamities triggered since 2020, our futures are constantly at risk. Be it due to global pandemics, climate change, local or regional wars, the ever-growing socio-economic gap, or populist regimes abhorring the less than 'standard', disabled people hold the knowledge and the strength to fight for a better outcome. Her theory might be radical, yet integrating a fairly distant yet plausible future, with the pertinent reality of the present has the potential to reshape what we view as critical disability studies.

While much of mainstream discourse still associates disability with deficit or deviance, disability studies has offered a critical counter-narrative that engages theory alongside activist practice. From its inception, disability studies has operated as a profoundly interdisciplinary and activist field, intervening in domains such as architecture, law, healthcare, and education. Central to its critique is the recognition that mainstream design has historically catered to a narrow, standardized conception of the body—typically able-bodied, male, white, and heteronormative. This hegemonic design paradigm marginalizes those who do not conform to its assumptions, including disabled, gendered, racialized, and queer bodies. As Ahmed (2006) and Costanza-Chock (2020) argue, such exclusions are structurally embedded within the built environment and technological systems, not accidental oversights. Disability studies has long challenged these exclusions by demonstrating how physical and symbolic infrastructures reproduce normative ideals under the guise of neutrality. It offers an alternative vision rooted in embodied diversity, relational access, and intersectional justice—not merely accommodating difference but fundamentally reimagining design through a politicized, inclusive lens.

Titchkosky's work (2011)— exploring the more intimate experience of disability through a discussion of embodiment, metaphor and the intimacy of narrative to foreground a politics of transformation—has much value. So does Guffey's critical insight (2018) that spans design history, material culture and recent critical disability studies to examine not only the development of a design icon and how it became a mark of identity (the International Symbol of Access), and a product that has profoundly impacted the lives of many disabled people from the 1930s onwards (the wheelchair), but also the cultural histories surrounding them. She focuses on how design both creates and responds to different notions of disability in addition to contributing to our understandings of disability experiences and subjectivities. Furthermore, she illuminates how design works in the real world, forcing a rethink of the top-down professionalized practice of universal design which has dominated thinking and practice around design for disability for decades (Guffey, 2017; 2023).

In India, for instance, discussions on the intersections of disability, embodiment and design as embedded in specific socio-cultural contexts is restricted to one of the authors of this paper (Das, 2020; 2024). Here, we would like to discuss how *jugaad* or rather what we may call "disability *jugaad*", a unique principle to the Indian context merits in-depth consideration. *Jugaad* is a

fascinating and complex, deeply embedded Indian socio-cultural practice of navigating daily challenges. It's more than just a word or concept; it's a mindset, a way of life, and a testament to the resourcefulness, efficiency, and ingenuity of the Indian people. It involves thinking outside the box, using whatever is available, and adapting or improvising existing solutions for new purposes. *Jugaad* is also about making things work, even if it means bending the rules or taking unconventional approaches. It signifies frugal innovation, grassroots ingenuity, and resourceful problem-solving, particularly in contexts of constraints or scarcity. It is not just a technical workaround but a mindset that blends resilience, improvisation, and adaptive reuse of materials to achieve functional outcomes. In India, *jugaad* reflects systemic challenges such as infrastructural deficits, socio-economic inequality, and bureaucratic inaccessibility—contexts in which the population must often rely on personal initiative and locally-situated knowledge systems to "make things work."

Gupta (2011) describes *jugaad* as a form of "innovative fix" or "workaround" born out of necessity, often executed by non-experts, using available materials and intuition. Radjou, Prabhu and Ahuja (2012) conceptualize *jugaad* as a form of "frugal innovation" — a bottom-up innovation paradigm that empowers the economically marginalized to create value with limited resources. These interpretations have been popularly valorized in management and innovation literature, sometimes abstracted and exported globally as part of India's "innovation ethos."

However, while mainstream interpretations tend to romanticize *jugaad* as entrepreneurial ingenuity, they often overlook the structural inequalities that make such improvisation necessary in the first place (Mukherjee, 2015). The practice, when decontextualized, may serve as a symbol of creativity but fails to address the systemic exclusions that necessitate such improvisation.

Jugaad has become an essential tool for many disabled people in India to navigate a world that is often not designed with their needs in mind. "Disability *jugaad*" refers to adaptive, creative, and often self-engineered solutions devised by disabled people, often outside formal design ecosystems, to overcome environmental, economic, and infrastructural barriers in a society that does not design for them. Unlike mainstream *jugaad*, which is often celebrated for its marketable innovation potential, "disability *jugaad*" emerges from a politics of survival. It arises due to systemic neglect: inaccessibility of built environments, unaffordable assistive technologies, and minimal state support for disabled citizens.

Disabled individuals often repurpose everyday items to create makeshift assistive devices or modify existing ones to better suit their needs, such as transforming a plastic bottle into a handle for easier gripping, using cardboard to create limb support, or modifying bicycles into wheelchairs, Due to the high cost and limited availability of specialized assistive devices, many rely on customized DIY solutions, creating their own mobility or other aids from readily available materials like bamboo, metal pipes, or even bicycle parts. *Jugaad* can also improve the functionality of existing assistive devices; for instance, someone might add padding to a wheelchair seat or modify a prosthetic limb for increased comfort and adaptability. Furthermore, disabled individuals and their families often use *jugaad* to make their homes and surroundings more accessible, either by installing grab bars, or modifying furniture and even vehicles. *Jugaad* can also be used to overcome barriers in public spaces. For example, someone using a wheelchair might create a makeshift ramp to access a building equipped solely with steps, or someone with a visual impairment might use a modified cane to navigate crowded streets. Ultimately, by creating their own assistive devices and adapting their environments, disabled people in India utilize *jugaad* to promote their inclusion and participation in society.

But *jugaad* is a double-edged sword. While it is of, by, and for disabled people, and thus respects their subjectivities and embodiments, granting them empowering agency—in contrast

to institutionalized 'assistive technologies'—it is also a product of mainstream design's disabling approaches and its failure to adequately address disability within the socio-economic and cultural contexts of South Asia. To further contextualize this, it is important to understand how dominant design paradigms historically marginalize certain bodies, and how disability *jugaad* emerges not only as a response to this exclusion but as a redefinition of design as a practice. Mainstream design practices have long privileged normative, able-bodied, male-centric models, leading to the systemic marginalization of bodies that fall outside these frames. Wheelchair users routinely encounter inaccessible public architecture (Imrie, 1996); women's bodies are excluded from industrial and digital design standards shaped around male dimensions (Criado Perez, 2019); and racialized communities experience infrastructural neglect and design bias that render their needs peripheral or invisible (Costanza-Chock, 2020). These exclusions are not incidental—they are embedded within what design historically valorizes as "universal," "rational," or "efficient" (Ahmed, 2006). *Disability jugaad*, by contrast, arises from within these zones of exclusion. It repurposes everyday materials through embodied, relational knowledge, offering functional, aesthetic, and ethical responses where formal design fails. As a practice, it exposes the limitations of normative design logics while enacting inclusive alternatives grounded in lived experience, adaptation, and critical resistance (Das, 2020; Hendren, 2020; Dokumaci, 2023).

Cross-cultural perspectives on inclusive architecture further underscore how accessibility is not a fixed standard, but a situated, negotiated practice. For example, vernacular Indian architecture in older cities like Ahmedabad or Jodhpur often allowed flexible thresholds, multi-sensory spatial cues, and intimate scales conducive to interdependence—a far cry from the hostile minimalism of contemporary urban design (Mehrotra, 2008). These examples complicate the assumption that "universal design" is neutral or globally applicable. *Disability jugaad*, by operating within such specific social-material ecologies, reveals that accessibility is often achieved not through compliance with formal codes, but through embodied negotiation, community care, and spatial improvisation.

Mainstream *jugaad* is often framed in apolitical terms — as cleverness under constraint. But disability *jugaad* is inherently political. It is a form of agency and resistance, highlighting the gaps in public infrastructure and design that exclude disabled people from full participation in society. As Hartblay (2020) suggests through her concept of "disability expertise," such practices reflect alternative ways of knowing and being that resist ableist norms and institutional failures. While it can empower disabled individuals through self-determination and embodied knowledge, disability *jugaad* also runs the risk of reinforcing neoliberal ideologies where the responsibility of access is offloaded onto the individual. This may enable policymakers to abdicate their responsibility by romanticizing grassroots resilience rather than addressing structural inaccessibility (Staples, 2020). Mainstream *jugaad* is often assessed based on technical ingenuity; disability *jugaad* introduces an aesthetic and ethical dimension. It highlights how disabled users modify not just the function of everyday objects but also reimagine their *form,* reclaiming dignity and aesthetics often denied by mainstream design (Das, 2020; 2024). These modifications are deeply somatic, shaped by how disabled bodies engage with the world, echoing Shusterman's (2012) somaesthetic principles.

This is where the concept of crip authorship becomes particularly generative. It offers a theoretical lens through which to understand *disability jugaad* not merely as a set of improvised practices, but as a methodological and epistemological intervention in design. In this regard, the work of Mills & Sanchez (2023) on crip authorship is useful. Crip authorship refers to the creative, critical, and methodological practices rooted in disability experience—as a generative

approach to knowledge-making across writing, research, media, and design. Disability becomes a method, revealing how dominant practices in production, aesthetics, and access can be critiqued, reimagined, and deconstructed. It is also a critical and political framework that challenges neoliberal ableism and normative corporeality and expands into *cripistemologies*—epistemologies grounded in embodied, relational, and intersectional vulnerability and resistance (Kafer, 2013).

A compelling illustration of these concepts in practice can be seen in a rural town in Assam, India, where Nabajit Bharali—a young philosophy student with no formal engineering training—designed a self-driven, pressure-sensitive wheelchair using discarded bicycle parts, at a cost of under ₹5,000 (~£62) (*The Guardian*, 2017). This innovation, born out of necessity and exclusion from formal assistive technologies, exemplifies *disability jugaad*. Bharali's wheelchair navigates through shifts in body pressure, requiring minimal physical input, and is entirely maintainable using locally available components. As a practice of repurposing and reimagining, it transforms every day, off-the-shelf materials into functional mobility aids, extending the life of both object and body through frugal, tactical design. More than a technical workaround, Bharali's design enacts what Mills and Sanchez (2023) describe as *crip authorship*, affirms disabled agency and what Kafer (2013) calls *disability as method*, refusing to separate lived embodiment from technical ingenuity. In doing so, this case challenges both the exclusionary norms of mainstream design and the romanticisation of resilience, offering instead a grounded, somatic, and relational epistemology of access.

Despite growing theoretical work on embodiment and relational ontologies in critical disability studies, these insights remain underutilized in the field of design. While ontological and epistemological discussions of the body—particularly around embodiment, relationality, and situated knowledge—have been central to feminist and disability studies (Ahmed 2006; Garland-Thomson 2005; Kafer 2013), these insights have not been adequately integrated into mainstream design theory and practice, which continue to operate through abstractions of the "universal" or "neutral" user. As a result, design often elides the material realities, interdependence, and diverse embodiments of users, privileging normative assumptions. This paper addresses that gap by foregrounding disability *jugaad* as both a conceptual and practical intervention that arises from embodied knowledge and crip epistemologies. In doing so, it contributes to reorienting design frameworks toward more relational, political, and inclusive understandings of the body-in-context.

Another significant issue in critical disability studies on design is the lack of adequate discussion regarding what more nuanced, feminist disability studies-informed social model approaches advocate: how the lived corporeal experience of disability, including pain and discomfort, is acknowledged and integrated into design thinking. This should not be treated as a negative attribute, but rather as an embodied phenomenon. Further, the ways in which stereotypes of the disabled "unaesthetic" body are enacted and re-enacted, and how these need to be re-envisioned in design encounters with disability, require attention. Design for inclusivity has rightly aimed to shift the focus on stigma and difference, striving to create an umbrella of 'good design for everyone.' However, while positive at a macro level, designers still lack the practical, ground-level approach needed to truly understand these embodied attributes. Beyond simply calling for care and empathy, truly understanding the daily, lived experience of disability requires significant time and effort. Design must articulate what it *means* to be disabled, rather than marginalizing or rendering disability invisible within mainstream, able-bodied design discussions. It is true that disability disrupts conventional representation, communication, or aesthetic models and now, design needs to co-opt this disruption as part of its innovation agenda

avoiding the rhetoric of design-for-disability which, in our opinion, is past its prime.

Thus, both Design Theory (and practice, as discussed previously) and Disability Studies inadequately address the nuanced theoretical and applied layers of the dialogue between non-standard bodies, such as those of disabled people, the socio-cultural sphere, and design practice. These gaps reflect, in part, the relative novelty of this area of inquiry, but also reveal the need to move beyond conventional thinking toward more contextually relevant, lived-experience-driven, and user-initiated design discourses and practices for disability. Such approaches, grounded in difference (specifically, the difference of the disabled body), offer alternative perspectives and open up new approaches, methods, and provocations.

One such novel approach could be to link disability pride and somaesthetics, i.e., to not hide the disability but foreground it. Campbell argues that an "abled imaginary" constructs an unacknowledged community of able-bodied and able-minded individuals. This community is unified by a shared, ableist perspective that privileges ableist norms (Campbell, in Ghai 2018: 40). Campbell contends that such ableist frameworks disregard the diverse ways humans express emotions and utilize their minds and bodies across cultures and contexts. What we call for in this paper is 'a disabled imaginary' that 'relies upon the existence of an acknowledged imagined shared community of disabled people, held together by a common world view that asserts the "preferability" of the norms of disability'; that underscores differences in the ways disabled people use emotions, thinking and bodies/minds in different cultures and in different situations; that asserts disabled identities.' Thus, the experience of negotiating selfhood within a disabled body can foster an alternative aesthetic, emphasizing ability and moral ideals. This process involves a reconceptualization of the body, shifting towards a more multidimensional understanding.

Another approach could be disability-led design examples which move away from the disability-as-deficit approach and instead view disability as a call for action that can inspire and trigger novel and radical approaches. We need disability models including a somaesthetic one that may, in fact, destabilize the aesthetic and political impact of representational practices to diminish ableist design paradigms and be undeniably respectful of the bodily aesthetics and agency of disabled people.

Functional Aesthetics or Why not Somaesthetics?

Whether we focus on ableism or disablism, an interesting concept relevant to our research is the 'production of disability' (Jen, 2018). In a Foucauldian way, society manufactures disability in a way that is controlled and subjugated to societal and physical disciplines. This conception influences our daily life including the ways we interact with our bodies, imagine the 'normative' body and interact with objects and products around us (Das, 2020). Somaesthetics can help designers understand that disability is a crucial element in society, allowing for a sense of 'being in the world', one deserving of relevant and intelligent products (Hamraei, 2016). Thus, both the aesthetics of the material world designed for disabled persons, as well as the approach towards disabled people in the urban landscape pass through a different design strategy. Naturally, designated products for the disabled further the stigma and title of 'disabled' (Das, 2024). On the other hand, while inclusive design seeks to fight stigma, yet in some cases it fails to offer appropriate or meaningful outcomes to people who need specialized solutions (see Shahar and Ventura, 2023).

Other, more person-centred approaches might offer another possibility. Inclusive design is generally based on the notion that designers should innovate for the extreme, yet design for the mainstream. In other words, if designers base their design on extreme conditions that will cater

to physical, mental or emotional differences, the mainstream, standard, user will be happy to use these as well. The classic example would be the OXO peeler which was designed for people with arthritis yet was so well-designed that it became a desired standard for everyone. Thus, this product does not bear the title of disability or medical device (Coleman et al., 2016; Ventura and Bichard, 2017). This approach is based on empathy and the necessity to understand the other and accept differences, however, this is not enough. To create a significant change we have to base our design strategies on clearly defined values. These, in this case, offer a view that the fractured, injured or disabled body is not only 'just fine', but it shouldn't be hidden. Therefore, designing for differences aims to not only change the way people perceive their bodies and themselves but also challenge the very notion of the standardized body. While defining a standard in industrial design and architecture is a necessity, we must reframe this notion or offer an alternative. Indeed, both Henry Dreyfuss (2003 [1955]) in industrial design and Ernst Neufert (2023 [1935]) in architecture offered us a way to standardize living spaces and products, and we can use their approaches as a springboard to challenge and reframe the notion of the standardized body.

In reflecting upon the unique attributes of aesthetics concerning disability, we should go back to German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten's definition of aesthetics as the "science of sensible cognition" (van Rompaey, 2017). Baumgarten's definition established a connection between sensory experience and comprehension, a link that is crucial for contemporary healthcare design. Although Baumgarten (1954 [1750]: 36) described a four-stage aesthetic process in the context of poetry, we can apply this same framework to healthcare and disability design:

(1) the 'notion' of the poem and its associated terminology, (2) the nature of 'poetic cognition', (3) elements common to the construction of all poems, and (4) the examination of 'poetic language' with some remarks about 'poetics in general. What is interesting and innovative about Baumgarten's theory is that aesthetics are not perceived as solely making a sensorial impression, but that they conduct an intricate dialogue with logic and the resources of reason (Nannini, 2021). This sensory dimension of aesthetics, as highlighted by Baumgarten, is reflected in both our behavior and perception. This connection between sensation and experience makes the concept of somaesthetics particularly relevant to healthcare. As Nannini (2022: 108) argues "The science dealing with bodies, Baumgarten states, is called somatology: hence, there is an ontological somatology if it looks at the body in itself; a cosmological somatology if it looks at the body as a part of the world, with special regard to its genesis from the elements and following the laws of motion; and a physical somatology if the body is considered a part of this world." This is an interesting addition to design for disability since a value-oriented approach, as we shall see, can serve to link a disabled or injured body to the world around it in a specific way.

A necessary addition to Baumgarten's theory, concerning the disabled body and design, would be the connection between somaesthetics and daily objects. As we suggest understanding the concept of disability, the disabled body's movements, or its soma, follow a different choreography to that of the standardized body. This is true regarding the dialogue disabled people have with healthcare products, but it is also relevant to daily objects that were designed for 'everyone' (Guspara, 2024). From a somatic point of view, these 'ordinary objects' deserve a bit of a focus. Saito (2017) argues that not only 'special' objects (in their creation or use) can be understood through the lens of aesthetics. Indeed, Saito (2022) stresses the connection between aesthetics and moral principles, specifically the notion of care, which is crucial when designing in a healthcare environment, but also when working with 'non-standardized people' (obviously, in our eyes, every designer needs a healthy dose of understanding diversity and empathy towards that understanding). Saito's contribution is mentioned specifically when discussing art theory,

but her relevance to design and the body is also interesting. We claim that focusing on design (healthcare-related or otherwise) will benefit from understanding and reframing 'ordinary' objects (that are not special in an art-related manner), through our senses, to harness care and articulated values to make people accept their injured or disabled body.Thus, high-end design or bespoke design is truly needed not for the wealthy and powerful, but rather for those whose integration could truly make a difference.

Another more ethical-related approach to somaesthetics, disability and design lies in the pursuit of freedom, not as a philosophical concept, but in our most mundane and daily actions. The ability to enable disabled or injured people to have a choice of design, materials, textures and colors of objects that correlate and are in constant dialogue with their body and self-perception is or should be a crucial design imperative. The design industry's long-standing indifference toward the lifestyle aspirations of disabled people has resulted in a focus on functionality over aesthetics. This has led to a proliferation of "ugly, clinical, bulky" products in "typical colors" that reinforce negative stereotypes and contribute to feelings of shame and seclusion. Offering such limited and stigmatizing options profoundly impacts their self-image (Das, 2020). When the tools and objects meant to aid them become symbols of disability, negative associations are internalized. The "clinical" aesthetic medicalizes disability, focusing on the "problem" to be fixed rather than the person living their life. The lack of choice in design, materials, textures, and colors denies individuality and personal style, further marginalizing disabled people and reinforcing the idea that they are somehow "different" or "less than" (Das, 2024). Essentially, they are being told, through design, that their aesthetic preferences don't matter and they should be thankful the functions fit their goals. There must be an ethical – or better, care full - shift in focus, moving beyond mere functionality to consider the *whole person* and their desire for freedom of choice, self-expression and dignity. By offering disabled people a range of design options that resonate with their personal tastes and self-perception, designers can empower them to reclaim their agency and express their identity. Imagine someone with a mobility impairment being able to choose a stylish and functional wheelchair that reflects their personality, rather than being limited to a standard, medical-looking device. This seemingly small act of choice can have a significant impact on their self-esteem and sense of belonging. It sends the message that their needs and desires are valued and that they have the right to participate fully and authentically in the world. This focus on choice and self-expression isn't a fleeting trend; it's a "crucial design strategy." It recognizes that design has the power to shape not only our physical environment but also our sense of self. By embracing an ethical, person-centered approach, designers can move away from perpetuating stigma and towards creating a more inclusive and empowering world for disabled people. Interestingly, the only designed product to make this shift in perspective are eyeglasses. Rather than buying these in a clinic, we go to a shopping mall and discuss fashion, styles and costs. Rather than being a medical disability, wearing eyeglasses imbues its wearer with an air of intelligence and sophistication.

When combining Baumgarten's definition of aesthetics with practice-based semiotics, we can test his reasoning with 2 short examples. First, as a company of accessories dedicated to disabled people with various physical disabilities, UNYQ took a different approach to the way their products look. Based on the approach that people take for granted the leg pylon they are provided with but pay more attention to the appearance of its cover, just like when you just buy an iPhone yet take ages to find the right cover, their website looks like H&M or any other fast-fashion website. In this strategy, going back to Baumgarten's approach, we understand the terminology of a 'healthcare product', recognize its meaning, understand its design language and change some of the elements. In other words, the designers at UNYQ wanted to transform a

prosthetic leg's cover from a healthcare product to a fashion accessory. With this logic, naturally, their design changed to offer people a choice in their daily outfits. Thus, using semiotic reasoning, we are dealing with an 'un-healthcare' aesthetics, resulting in opposing colours, textures, patterns and shapes. However, the deeper meaning of this strategy was an understanding that a person with one leg has a different body, rather than a chronic medical situation or a broken or unworthy body.

Another example of harnessing empathy and care, or specified values, in reframing a person's perception of their body can be understood through the project of designer Teddy Schuyers during her studies at Design Academy Eindhoven. Schuyers decided to focus on redesigning the ostomy bag in a way that will not deal directly with its medical or biological functions but with its dialogue with the wearer's body. This innovative approach views the patient as any other person with a different body, thus offering three configurations for daily routines - a fashionable, elegant option for office work; a sexier version for intimate encounters; and a sportier version for physical activities. All these basic, daily activities shift the wearer from a healthcare-related position into 'normal life' through clever use of aesthetics - materials, shapes and colours. Again, using design in an intelligent and sensitive way led to a shift in the product's perception.

Another wonderful example is Jae-Hyun An's design of a prosthetic leg that allows amputees to perform ballet[2] , showcasing the dialogue between disability and the social body, design and somaesthetics. From a standardized position, there is no logical or economic justification for this product. The size of the community of users that have a leg prosthetic and were former dancers is probably minute. The classic design or soma approach would be to teach them to make do with walking. However, from an empathic approach, design is exactly the right tool for this brief, since the designer's primary role in society is to help people function (well) in their daily lives. Therefore, if said daily routine includes professional dancing, then the designer needs to produce a suitable product. From a somatic perspective, the disabled body will learn new or newer movements through the use of this prosthetic leg. From a design anthropology perspective, the aesthetics of this product are interesting since this does not resonate with a 'medical product'. The lines are clean, the materials are reminiscent of professional sports and the overall feel is that of power, elegance and ability, not pity and shame.

These interesting examples of this strategy could be viewed through the choice of camouflaging or accentuating the fractured, injured, disabled or simply different body using designed products (Ventura and Gunn, 2017). Historically, the mainstream of industrial design, focusing on mass-produced products, worked towards supplying these to a standardized person. Typically, this standard person was perceived as healthy, of whole body and mind, and predisposed to purchase consumer goods. Only after the innovative approach of American designer Henry Dreyfuss (1955) did the question of non-standardized bodies become a topic for debate. Using his "Joe and Josephine" invented personas, of a white (heterosexual) and healthy couple, further created a correlation between the standardized body and industrial design. However, in a later version of his ergonomic methodology titled Humanscale, Dreyfuss adds different body types and disabilities.

While his efforts are highly important, the dichotomy between the standard and a-standard bodies led to designs that tried to camouflage the differences presented by the latter. For example, design for injured or disabled people was rooted in aesthetic strategies of concealment and camouflage. Thus, unobtrusive colors, materials and shapes were used to render said disability or injury practically invisible. While offering solutions for people with physical issues

2 https://www.dezeen.com/2018/11/02/prosthetic-leg-ballet-design-jae-hyun-an-marie-t/

is important, on a value-oriented level this approach is highly problematic. When using design to camouflage a person's difference, it is a good choice, but as this solution is generally based on specific aesthetics catering to specific needs, these will practically hold a sign saying 'this is a different person'. In other words, aiming for invisibility might result in the opposite outcome altogether (Ventura and Gunn, 2017).

A Different Path, or Value-Oriented Aesthetics

As we know just from looking around us, designers, when working within a marketing ethos, tend to harness their abilities to enhance revenue and focus on the 'average consumer'. In other cases, local or national government agencies present camouflage bad design under well-intended guise (Hartblay, 2017). However, when focusing on social design principles, coupled with the humanistic approach ingrained in anthropology, the shift from the market to people is crucial. Furthermore, adding critical disability theory introduces another much-needed political aspect to this intricate field. The common denominator is specified values, based on social justice. While we cannot delve into all the intricacies of social justice, we wish to highlight several key points here. Parvin (2023) echoes what we've seen throughout this paper, that simply wanting something does not make it real. Design, as an ingrained and intricate patina of late capitalism tend to transform any ideology to style, the combination of social design (an evolution of or addition to design anthropology, in our eyes) and the critical eye of disability studies will enhance the empathy needed, as well as the imagined outcomes of designers. Katsniz (2020: S24) describes this gap brilliantly, saying that "Disabled people rarely commission design. Designers design what they want to design for a purpose they want to meet. Disabled people are the colonized consumers." Indeed, Parvin goes on to propose that: "making design processes more inclusive through democratic strategies, such as participatory and codesign methods; and recognizing design as a mode of practical ethical inquiry—one that prescribes radical changes to design education and practice." (Guersenzvaig, Ventura and Espelt, 2024: 41).

Indeed, the same notion of social justice relevant to design, also can serve as a link between disability studies and anthropology, as Katsniz (2020: S16) describes it: "The disability justice movement pulls the intersectional performance of disability out of the intimate sphere so that it can play a role in policy, an analytic where anthropology should shine. Disability by definition is remarkable. Disabled people live with the reality that the public wants to define that remarkableness and the knowledge that if they do not manage their human relationships carefully, their remarkableness will be used to control them." Change will come not merely by adding one knowledge world on top of the other, but by making designers relearn their practice (Criado, 2020). As such, our suggested path is not an amalgam of previously developed disciplines, but a new way of understanding and creating designed solutions for the disabled community.

Social designers, or designers with a strong value-oriented mindset, need to not only supply disabled people with modes of survival but also empower them to prosper, flourish, and experience the fullness of human life, just like in the ballerina prosthetic leg. Following John Dewey's famous 'lived experience' approach, somaesthetics can help designers reflect the crucial need for aesthetic pleasure and enjoyment in their designed products (Surbaugh, 2010). This approach resonates with Shusterman's (2012) differentiation between representational and pragmatic somaesthetics. While the former involves philosophical understanding and body image in society, the latter is even more important when dealing with the potential of the meeting ground between design and disability. Indeed, this cannot be stressed enough, since

the possibility of sensorial pleasure is built on trust, agency, choice and dialogue with one's surroundings – traits that are sorely missing from design for people living with a disability, who are too often relegated to focusing on mere survival or getting by with what's currently available. This lack of attention to aesthetic needs perpetuates a sense of marginalization and reinforces the idea that disabled lives are somehow less worthy of beauty and joy. As we have seen, there have been many attempts to define and focus our understanding of disability. Fergusson and Nusbaum (2012) define the five core concepts of disability science, as social, foundational, interdisciplinary, participatory, and value-based. As we imagine a somaesthetic socio-cultural design for disability (S^2CDD) approach, these points are bolstered and expanded further. First, S^2CDD is not only deeply social, but its cultural facets are as important (Das, Ventura and Dubey, 2025), recognizing the diverse cultural contexts within which disability is experienced. Second, the differences between disabled and non-disabled people are not enough, we need to delve deeper into the very notions of 'normal' and 'standard' not only in theory but in design practice challenging the very foundations of what we consider "typical." Third, S^2CDD must be inter-disciplinary, since, as we have shown, even combining somaesthetics, disability studies and anthropology - is not enough. We must draw upon fields like psychology, social science, cultural studies, engineering, materials science, and even art and fashion to create truly holistic solutions. Fourth, co-design and participatory design are crucial for various reasons - on a practical note, we need to understand the disabled person's experience to better design products. Moreover, from a social justice perspective, this is what should be done as standard - designing *with*, not designing *for*. Lastly and most importantly is the question of values. Value-oriented design is the core of social design driving its transformative potential. In our case, we need to define the core values to stand as a beacon for all designers working in this space: social justice, and equality – not as a catchphrase, but as a deeply felt human condition– social change, a critical and ideological stance that challenges ableism in all its forms, and a commitment to celebrating the diversity and richness of human experience. These values must not be mere aspirations but rather guiding principles that inform every stage of the design process, from the initial concept to the final product.

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Collective Soma: The Aesthetics of Maggi

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Abstract: *Taking Maggi cubes as a case study, the article explores the aesthetics of mass consumption among populations whose choices are limited. Rather than being passive actors of biopolitical imposition or a capitalist ploy, consumers agentively appropriated global commodities into local ethics and aesthetics of mutual bodily care. In fact, collectivities experiencing a shift of habitus due to modernisation and the industrial commodities it brought co-appeared together in a dense weave of material-semiotic relations marked by what could be termed as a "tension of information".*

Keywords: *Maggi bouillon cubes, African culinary industrialization, needful freedom, co-apparition, ethics and aesthetics of collective embodiment.*

Richard Shusterman's intervention in aesthetic philosophy considers the body in a manner that paves the way for a transformation of aesthetics. However, it seems that by "aesthetic" he still refers to *a* use of *a* body[1] that is heir to the burdens of the traditional aesthetic subject. Not only is the *sujet du goût*, especially in its non-metaphorical sense (Shusterman, 2016), still an individual, such subjects are also enabled to *freely* make decisions to enrich their experience. Yet is this necessarily so? As Annemarie Mol (202, p.17) argues, "cultivating 'my body' depends on the efforts involved in cultivating ever so many other f/actors" (people, substances, global commodity chains, etc.). Hence, to isolate the subject of taste is to continue to exercise problematic distinctions and exclusions. The gist of our argument will be the consideration of the aesthetic dimension of a "needful freedom"[2] , that is, the one that takes place in the context of an already-existing material semiotic network (Law, 2019) within which it –and the embodied self that exercises such a freedom– co-appear (*com-parution*) in Jean Luc Nancy's (1996/2000) terms. To advance this argument, we will focus on a commodity that appears emblematic of pretty much everything that Schusterman's individualistic meliorative aesthetic of embodiment and proper eating opposes: the Maggi bouillon cube. After laying out a theoretical framework indebted to Jean-Luc Nancy, Gilbert Simondon, Annemarie Mol and John Law, we review historical and ethnographic evidence of the rise of Maggi consumption in Africa, and conclude

1 Agamben (2014/2016). For an understanding of it from aesthetics, see Bocos Mirabella (2022, p.345-59), particularly in relation to somaesthetics.

2 According to Jonas (1966/1994), the living being *needs* material from the environment to create itself: "in a word, the organic form stands in a dialectical relation of *needful freedom* to matter" (80) that connects the eating subject to a network.

that – far from representing an alien corruption of African culinary traditions and the material semiotic networks in which they take shape – the taste for Maggi bespeaks not the demise, but reproduction of an ethics of collective care under conditions of social transformation[3].

Few seem to have intuited the nutritional aspects of this problematic of "needful freedom" earlier and more clearly than the Italo-Swiss miller Julius Maggi (1846-1912). Shifting his focus from popular nutrition ("Volksernährung") to mass nutrition ("Massenernährung"), he defined the latter as:

> "(…) the nutrition of all those who cannot freely determine it, whether their situation of constraint arises from economic dependence, such as, e.g., among industrial factory populations, or from our political and social order, such as in the case of our troops and navy, among those under the care of hospitals, those attending religious or secular educational institutions, and so forth, or among inmates of prisons." (Maggi, 1887 cited in Vinçon, 1992, p.195. Our translation).

The beachhead for the earliest industrially produced foods (hard-tack, canned foods…) were total institutions such as armies and navies (Goody, 1982). But as Maggi understood, not just hospitals or prisons, but especially factories were fast becoming vast reservoirs of consumers incapable of freely determining their nutrition. If the diet of Swiss peasants and artisans on the eve of industrialization had largely consisted of bread, gruel and porridge made from rye, oats, and spelt, along with potatoes and dairy products, by the second half of the 19th century, the increasing numbers of landless rural proletarians headed towards factory labor neither had the means to grow their own grains, nor the purchasing power to access them, meat or bones in sufficient quantity or on a regular basis, and least of all the time needed to make bread, gruel, porridge or bouillon from scratch.

Cheap, filling, and quickly prepared, Maggi's instant pea soup, bouillon cubes, and seasoning products rushed in to fill that gap between hunger and acceptable forms of satiation with remarkable speed, transforming as they did so the very meaning of the "modern" meal (both accelerating and standardizing domestic food) and molding novel forms of gustatory subjectivity that coalesced around industrially branded taste profiles. Industrial proletarians *learned how to like* Maggi products by being socialized into building them into what Pierre Bourdieu (1990) might have called their culinary "habitus". The result was a race towards a salty, distinctly Maggi-tasting bottom which, for better or worse, engraved itself into the culinary memories of generations of Europeans, generating a sense of belonging. What eventually resulted was a blurring of the boundaries between home cooking and industrial food to a degree that adding Maggi products to soup made from scratch became not just acceptable, but potentially desirable.

Was this, to paraphrase Horkheimer and Adorno (1947/2002, p.120-67), culinary "enlightenment as mass deception"? A biopolitical ploy to satiate the masses with standardized, industrially prescribed tastes, offering cheap, banal satisfaction in lieu of an aesthetic pleasure worthy of the name? By now there exists a massive literature portraying the eaters of industrial food as individuals bereft of the power of decision and discernment, trapped in a labyrinth of stimuli organized by a sophisticated laboratory science that engineers artificial hedonic rewards, so as to prod mindless further consumption. Addicted to products that provide quick but ephemeral gustatory thrills, the much decried fast-food junkies find their remedy in the source

3 In response to one of *Journal of Somaesthetics*' reader's concern about our singling out Africa as a case in point, and thereby inadvertently replicating a "from tradition to modernity" narrative so often foisted on this continent, let us simply quote a passage from Simpson Miller's (2021, p.248) excellent history of foodways in Ghana: "People have been consuming readymade meals in Ghana since the seventeenth century. Prepared food served in markets by enterprising women […] predated colonial rule and arguably preceded the development of fast food in the West."

of their problem (e.g. Cargill, 2016).

While certainly not untrue (especially in the global North), such treatments of the issue not only thrive on an overly individualistic conception of the agent (or patient!) of consumption, and so neglect that eating is a fundamentally social activity involving more than just individual or statistically averaged bodies (Mol, 2021). Moreover, such approaches neglect the role of industrial products as ingredients of homecooked meals (even in contemporary peasant societies, store bought commodities like flour, sugar, salt, or cooking oils are indispensable to traditional cuisines), and so lead us into the paradox that millions of people apparently consume edible commodities of often questionable nutritional benefit and possibly noxious character *precisely because they want to eat well and want to prepare delicious homemade food for those they care for.*

Yet, because of this tension, Maggi cubes can be considered a "good form": "one […] approaching paradox without becoming a paradox, approaching contradiction without becoming a contradiction […]" (Simondon, 1958/2020, p. 688); a form that has the "capacity to traverse, animate and structure a varied domain, increasingly varied and heterogeneous domains" with an infinite series of receptors "not defined in advance" (p. 689). Viewed from a systemic perspective, the supposed "passivity" of the masses is surprisingly akin to the alleged passivity of matter. However, as Gilbert Simondon demonstrated, matter has a form function. Wanting to understand "good form" in systemic context, Simondon uses the term "in-formation":

> "The tension of information would be a schema's property to structure a domain, to propagate through it, to organize it. But the tension of information cannot act alone: it does not also contribute all the energy that can guarantee the transformation; it only contributes this tension of information, i.e. a certain arrangement that can modulate much more considerable energies deposited in the domain that will receive the form, take on a structure. There can be form-taking only if two conditions are joined together: a tension of information contributed by a structural germ, and an energy harbored by the milieu that takes form: the milieu—which corresponds to the old notion of matter—must be in a tensed metastable state, like a supersaturated or supercooled solution, which is waiting for the crystalline germ so it can pass to the stable state by unleashing the energy that it harbors." (Simondon, 1958/2000, p.689)

For Simondon, inorganic "germs" dropped into super-saturated crystalline solutions were informative; for us so it is a cube consisting largely of hydrolyzed plant protein and salt packaged in bright red and yellow dropped into the pots and pans of people in the process of modernistic "massification". The metastable tension of such environments is, in the case at hand, precisely the changes in "form of life" (in Wittgenstein's sense) and habitus that these populations were and are facing –forced to shift from traditional orientations, including their intimate relationship to food, to those of an industrial modernity in which the market becomes "second nature". Such newly "massified" populations learned to like Maggi, to be sure. But the industrial machinery was also learning to channel the novel reduction of aesthetic options and dispositions that industrial modernization was creating. The metastable "mass" is what contains the energy by which a structural germ expands. In the end, Maggi and a collective sensorium attuned to it thus emerged simultaneously, "intra-actively" (Barad, 2007), from a dense weave of relations marking a new era in which pre-existing somaesthetic traditions were paradoxically folded into the context of hypercapitalism and globalization. Both bodily needs and aesthetics values played a crucial role in this shift. In fact, there are at least two different ways of understanding somaesthetic melioration: the one of Julius Maggi himself, concerned to improve popular nutrition; and the

attitude of the "mass", that found (and still finds) in Maggi the affordances needed to effect this transition from one milieu to another.

Hence the success of Maggi is, paradoxically, a success of the plural, of the conjunction and conjugation of different voices, tastes and perspectives. Maggi prompts somaesthetics to think beyond the individuated free *sujet du goût* and shift its attention to subjects whom the classical philosophical traditions (from Aristotle to Hume and Kant, but also Schusterman's somaesthetics) failed to understand as "aesthetic" ones. Furthermore, it reminds of the fact that the body is collective[4] not only because it participates in collective actions (in the sense of Mary Douglas), but because it is the body's appearance in the world – its being thrown into a network – that articulates it as a body. In Jean Luc Nancy's words,

> "Above all else, 'body' really means what is outside, insofar as it is outside, next to, against, nearby, with a(n) (other) body, from body to body, in the dis-position. Not only does a body go from one "self" to an "other," […]; whether made of stone, wood, plastic, or flesh, a body is the sharing of and the departure from self […]." (Nancy, 1996/2000, p.8)

And, while this is true for all bodies, the-eating-body is necessarily defined as an expanded and immersed body (Bocos Mirabella, 2022). As anthropology has shown, the eating body poses new tasks of definitions for an "empirical philosophy" (Mol, 2021):

> "The eating body […] offers a model of being in which the inside depends on the outside, while continuity depends on change. A model of being, too, in which what was far away may be absorbed inside me, while what was inside me gets widely dispersed. […] while, as a walker, I move through the world; when I eat, it is the world that moves through me." (Mol, 2021, p.49)

This co-appearance interpellates the body into a socio-ecological somaesthetic that expands beyond self-enhancement[5] to include the situatedness of any such acts within locally and historically changing networks. Therefore, we think a more nuanced view of Maggi aesthetics is in order: one capable of recognizing forms of care for self and others –a form of *collective* somaesthetic enhancement– in the contexts of daily ingestion, need and hunger. Even in the face of the (often) inevitable consumption of industrial foods, an aesthetic dimension is at work, albeit from different anudations and networks to those of the aesthetic experiences of the "societies without hunger" (Jaques et Vilar, 2024) defined by the tradition of gustatory aesthetics, to which somaesthetics still seems to adhere (Pryba, 2016).

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Let us flesh this out with some ethnographic examples. Europeans have always been mesmerized by the ways in which their non-Western interlocutors made use of, and thereby transformed, what they saw as quotidian technologies, objects, and values of their own cultures (e.g. Howes, 1996). Yet the Swiss missionary ethnographer Al Imfeld is simply astonished at arriving at

4 What the body is constitutes a philosophical question that has been posed in historically varying ways and received diverse and changing answers (see Synnott, 1992). Somaesthetics has also paid attention to it, particularly, Tedesco (2012, p.8) who asserts that "we must first remember the semantic richness of the word soma, whose meaning is not limited to the living body […] but also includes analogical transfers to the 'body of discourse,' from its discursive articulations (soma also means 'element of a structural organization') to its value and function, which are always public and contextual […]".

5 Boisvert, Raymond. *Ecological Somaesthetics. Beyond Self-enhancement* (cited by Perullo, 2022, p.169-170). Perullo criticizes Shusterman's "massive use of the self-prefix", reminds us of Dewey's objection to it and presents Boisvert's ecological, communal and more-than-human model for somaesthetics, one not limited to "the own body". However, 'the own body'is already a body-with, a singular-plural (Nancy, 1996/2000). Boisvert (2010) also takes the preposition "with" into account.

Cameroon's terminal northern train station of Ngaoundere in 1988 to see veritable ziggurats of red and yellow Maggi cubes in the dusty street:

> "In this environment of copper-red earth, reddish dust, brown-red ants, waning dusk, and a red-hot sun just about to set, the Maggi yellow appeared like a magnet. This cube at the top [of these structures] appeared to me as something like temptation incarnate or a hailing to take, take, take and take as long as it's there, one more, take and take ever more. An inner illumination – and it resembled the irresistible yellow of the cube – revealed to me like a flash of lightning that what I was just experiencing was the primordial beginning of consumer desire brought to the point." (Imfeld, 1989, p.1. Our translation)

Still referring to this episode at what must have seemed a god-forsaken part of Cameroon (had it not been for that country's plans to build a high-tech nutritional research facility, there, which Imfeld was to visit), Imfeld goes on to say that

> "This kernel of Maggi contains the explosion of all future worlds. The development towards the modern and monetized world begins with cubes, with the cubism of temptation; without temptation no progress; Maggi, the cubism of culinary culture, the longing for modernity." (Imfeld, 1989, p.1. Our translation)

We will return to Imfeld's sense of wonderment. But let us first retrace how Maggi cubes entered into African cuisines[6]. Chances are that the first bouillon cubes reached colonial West Africa (British Gold Coast, German Kamerun) well before World War I through the Basel Mission whose Basler Missions-Handlungs-Gesellschaft was incorporated in 1859. Due to significant Swiss emigration to German Southwest Africa, both Maggi and Knorr products had reached Namibia by 1910 (Berner, 2010). Manfred Stoppok reports that elderly informants recalled that "cubos de galinha" and "cubos de Maggi" had already become ubiquitous under Portuguese rule in the 1950s (Stoppok, 2011, p.55).

Much of Maggi's global diffusion, however, seems to post-date its merger with Nestlé in 1947. Towards the end of the 1950s, concerted efforts by the latter company to export Maggi cubes to Africa commenced in Liberia, and in 1961 Nestlé expanded its marketing of Maggi products to Nigeria. In the following decade, the company followed its product. By the mid-1980s, Nestlé had set up production sites for Maggi cubes in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Senegal. By 2004, it had added further plants in Guinea-Conakry, Kenia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, and national offices in Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Madagascar, Mozambique, Niger and São Tomé and Principe (Nestlé, 2005). Yet no one seems to have paid proper heed to the dynamics of this humble "worldly good" (in Robert Foster's [2008] sense of a commodity that defines a central node in a network of global and local perspectives on its economic utility, and extra-economic valorization). How Maggi entered African home cooking, thereby transforming the culinary habitus of millions has largely evaded scholarly attention[7].

But let us return to Imfeld's reflections. After recounting his technoaesthetic awakening[8] in

6 Here we hasten to add that we are decidedly not arguing for a simple extension to the African continent of the meanings and uses ("sense") of Maggi developed in Europe. Following Nancy, "meaning is itself the sharing of Being" (1996/2000, p.2), so that the sense of Maggi is not prior to its co-appearance and, more than that, so that its origin "occurs at each moment of the world. It is *the each* time of Being […]. The origin is for and by way of the singular plural of every possible origin."

7 Even Brandi Simpson Miller's (2021) excellent history of food transformations in Ghana from precolonial times to the present restricts herself to a few sporadic mentions of Maggi products. That she sees the emergence, since the 1930s, of female owned urban Chop Shops serving wage earning men as an entry point for Maggi underscores our argument.

8 In the sense that a familiar object, when seen beyond its function, becomes "surreal", "extraordinary". Simondon believed that "the technical being reproduced and disclosed through industry loses its surreal value to the extent that the anesthesia of everyday use deprives perception of the object's singular characteristics. Seen as a utensil, the technical being no longer has meaning for the individual. The community appropriates

Cameroon, he turns towards Guinea Bissau where Maggi cubes had, by the 1980s, become the only stable currency in the post-revolutionary period: valued at 50 pesos at a time when inflation had put 50 peso coins out of circulation. "This is the only stable thing, here" an agronomist tells him. "Maggi was already here when we came. Comes across the border to Senegal, where Nestlé produces locally. The people think it's indigenous – just like the peso. They just can't read the 'Made in Switzerland' label" (Imfeld, 1989, p.4-5. Our translation).

Speaking to local women involved in a European-sponsored agricultural development project, Imhof gets a sense of why Maggi has made its home in postcolonial Guinea Bissau. As would figure, the women chide him: "why are you so critical when it comes to the cube? Because it gives us more freedom? Or are you jealous and believe that this cube is really a gris-gris? Our men say that when we use Maggi in cooking for guests, they always like it better and that this would be understood as a declaration of love. Our men think that Maggi is to blame when other men desire us." They all agree that Maggi is simply good and delicious: "Of course we can make similar sauces. But that takes time. But when we now have to tend to the onions and manioc [for the development project] we lack the time for that. Development takes up a lot of time. These days we're busy all day long. We lack the two hours we need to prepare the sauce." "A modern African woman," says one of them, "needs three things and these are a bra, as a little secret to be kept from her man, Maggi cubes, and Nido baby formula for the children." Another one pipes in more aggressively: "do you also ask the men in administration jobs why all have a box of Marlboro in their breast pocket, even when it never contains cigarettes of that brand? Why do all of them have to have a Bic ballpoint pen? And why do they carry little briefcases with usually nothing in them? Everyone needs something for prestige. For us women this is clothes, perfume, jewelry, and, of course, Maggi" (Imfeld, 1989, p.5-6. Our translation).

For Imfeld's interlocutors, there was no contradiction in this indigenization of global industrial culinary modernity. On the contrary, these women experienced Maggi not so much as a gustatory revelation, but as the co-appearance of a means to the end, under new conditions, of enhanced care for the self and the collectivities within which gendered flows of food provide a crucial part of social being. Put differently, what Imfeld encountered was the expansion of the primordial plurality in which Maggi appears: its universe expands and, with it, the forms of its being-with multiply.

By the time that Manfred Stoppok was doing research in Guinea Bissau, some 20 years after Imhof, the cubes had become so fully integrated into local foodways that they were commonly referred to as "gusto" – taste, or that which makes food tasty. As he writes: "One buys and adds 'gusto', i.e. taste, to the food. Already this designation demonstrates the enormous importance of this product for [Guinean] food. For who would want to eat a meal without taste?" (Stoppok, 2011, p.64-65. Our translation). Who indeed? And who would want to serve such a meal to others? Deliberately serving bad food, as Stoler and Olkes (1986) demonstrated among the Songhay of Niger, can be as critical a "gastropolitical" (Appadurai, 1981) affront as, say, the accusation of witchcraft, and by that very token as indicative of strained social relations as the latter within close-knit kinship-based communities.

What is at stake in such cases is, at the very least, the dignity of both cook and consumer. As one of us can attest to from doing fieldwork during the worst years of the economic crisis in

it, normalizes it, and gives it a use value that is foreign to its own dynamic essence." (Simondon, 1958/2020, p.416). When Infeld paid attention to Maggi cubes in Africa, he saw them within an unfamiliar network and so he could appreciate not only the technical object as such but also the effects of its dynamic *in a different socio-material network*.

Cuba of the early 1990s, after former Soviet support vanished into thin air, the lack of products available through the government rationing system reduced people to eating what Stephan Palmié's Cuban interlocutors regularly described as a "sancocho" (pig swill) made from "cualquier cosa que aparezca" (whatever may appear on the legal food market for national currency rather than dollars). What was on the minds of many if not most Cubans at the time, was not so much somatic self-care, but their self-image as "gente decente" – decent, or dignified people – who shouldn't be made to eat such crap, but, more importantly even, shouldn't be made to inflict it on their loved ones (Palmié, 2004)[9] .

In precisely this sense – as a bridge between bodies, a "being-with" – in several other African cases, equivalents to Stoppock's Guinean "gusto" had come to replace previous local flavor enhancers[10] . Similar findings have been reported from northern Ghana, where a local, plant-based Hausa flavor enhancer known as *dawadawa* is yielding to Maggi cubes (Ham, 2017). But convenience (here understood as a freeing-up, for other pursuits, the domestic reproductive labor-time of cooking from scratch) is not the only form of utility involved. Sheer purchasing power plays a role as well. As an Institute for Development Studies/Oxfam study reports,

> "In Burkina Faso […] it has become unthinkable to cook a meal without 'Maggi', a famous stock cube/flavouring in West Africa. In Kaya, a district town, a 51 – year old woman taking part in in a focus group with other female civil servants, explained that she first saw a Maggi Cube when aged seven her mother returned from a trip to France. At that time, it was an ingredient mostly used by well-to-do families. Now, participants in the discussion explained, gone are the days when they could buy enough meat for a sauce with 100CFA (approximately £0.11), and Maggi has become the staple flavoring to make a meal 'acceptable'. In both the rural and the urban research sites in Burkina, respondents would often say that if one does not put Maggi in the sauce, no one will eat the meal" (Hossein et al. 2015, p.20)

No one will eat the meal: a failure to accept the gift of food, and so a sign of the breakdown of the unspoken principle of reciprocity that Marcel Mauss (1925/2016), long ago heralded as the key to human sociality! To be sure, what we find in these cases is a form of culinary outsourcing of standards of gustatory acceptability to the food chemists at Nestlé. On the other hand, such commodification of "taste" – as a commercially purchased addition to food – is not at all the sheer result of the top-down industrial stultification of neophyte proletarians. Instead, and at the very least, it appears to thrive on a wide-spread African pattern where complex carbohydrates (rice, yams, plantain, sorghum, millet, manioc, etc.) form the basis of any meal, but are unthinkable *as a meal* unless accompanied by even only small amounts of a relish or sauce composed of animal or vegetable protein that often is described as necessary for the food to go down. Identified for the first time by Audrey Richards in her ethnographic work among the Bemba in Northern Rhodesia (Richards, 1939), and later theorized by Sidney Mintz (Mintz and Nayak, 1985) as the "core-fringe pattern" common to most agrarian populations worldwide, it may well be that it was this conception of what proper food ought to consist in (all else might be a snack, or worse, an indignity) that underlay the phenomenal success of Maggi in sub-Saharan Africa. Temptation incarnated, indeed! Modernity and female empowerment condensed into a red and yellow packaged cube. A co-apparition.

Though Nestlé may not have been aware of this at the time the company began exporting to Africa, its bouillon cubes seem to have functioned like a key to the door provided by the

9 See Hannah Garth (2020) on the continued struggle for a *decent* meal in Cuba twenty years later.

10 Such as *netetu* (*sounbareh* in Sierra Leone, Slow Food Foundation, 2011), a seasoning prepared from the fermented, boiled, re-fermented and dried fruit of the African locust bean tree (Parkia globosa), *camarão seco* (dried crab), or *escalada* (dried salt cod).

core-fringe pattern (not incidentally homologous to the diet of Swiss peasants). By now, of course, Nestlé's taste designers are well aware of this. In its publications, the company is explicit about the fact that not all cubes are created equal anymore. Instead, taste profiles are adapted to regional and local preferences and calibrated against competitor brands such as the Spanish cube Jumbo which enjoys wide popularity in Senegal. Counting only the cubes (i.e. not powders or liquids), Nestlé's website lists nine different versions of its Maggi seasoning products marketed in different regions of Africa: Shrimp/Crevette/Crayfish, Chicken/Poulet, Onion Epice, Cube Regular/Tablette, Mutton, Kari Tablet, Safsafal, Nokoss, and Golden Beef (https://www.nestle-cwa.com/en/brands/culinary/maggidetails).

Their impact on local foodways is undeniable and it projects forward into contemporary African diasporas. Grossrieder (2017) cites the case of Ousmane Sow, a Guinea Konakryan owner of a Zurich-based specialty store named Afro-Shop who conducts brisk business with Maggi cubes produced in Abidjan. These travel 4850 kilometers while the nearest Maggi production plant, in southwestern Germany, is only 50 kilometers away. Likewise, in Chicago's Old World Market that has long catered to that city's African immigrant population, not one of the Maggi cubes on sale there is produced in Europe or the U.S.: Maggi Crevette from Côte d'Ivoire, Halal Chicken and Crayfish from Nigeria, Vegetable Flavor and Caldo de Res from Guatemala; only the range of liquid seasonings featured a product from Germany, alongside a Chinese and Mexican version. Although a wide variety of dried or powdered African condiments, as well as dried shrimp and smoked fish are also available, they appear to supplement, rather than supplant the ubiquitous African-produced Maggi cubes that shore up African flavor profiles abroad (Renne, 2007 and Williams-Forson, 2010 on the formation of African immigrant cuisines in the U.S.). Clearly, not any old cube will do, when it comes to what Richard Wilk (2006) aptly calls "home cooking in the global village".

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Is this a gloomy picture of the erosion of non-Western gustatory somaesthetics under the impact of the onslaught of Nestlé and other food-industrial giants? Perhaps. But we are inclined to grant quite a bit more of agency to the consumers who came to be enrolled in Nestlé global commercial network *and* impacted it in turn. In our view, the very notion of a traditional cuisine that has been left behind as past ('the other'), refers to an outside of the system that does not exist, insofar as it is not allowed to co-appear with everything else, to communicate, or to transform itself. The very definition of the "pure" is precisely the strategy that nullifies its agency. In line with Nancy's ontology[11], we can thus rid ourselves of certain prejudices about Maggi cubes because a critique of the arrival of these products can only be based on an ample understanding of their modes of appearance within multiple networks, taking into account all possible directions, their tensions and even contradictions.

Siding with Marshall Sahlins (2000), we would argue that (as with many other exogenous products), non-Western consumers took to Maggi so as to "become more like themselves" – not any less so (Baviskar, 2018; Simpson Miller, 2021). Far from steamrolling local culinary cultures and their somaesthetics dimensions out of existence, western industrial modernity has been appropriated in an agentive, even discerning manner (Errington, Fujikura and Gewertz, 2012) to maintain critical forms of reciprocity between bodies who, in Marilyn Strathern's (1988) crucial sense, must be conceived as "dividuals": porous containers of variegated and changing

11 We agree with Perullo (2022) that the understanding of being-with, which he also derives from Nancy (and others), negates ontology as defined by "fixed" essences in favor of a processual approach. However, we are more interested in Nancy's notion that the primary question of ontology is not the logic of essences, but their sociality (Nancy, 1996/2000, p.37-38).

configurations of personhood that depend not on care of a "self" (a questionable notion in such contexts), but on the ethical demands of an ontology of "being-with"– in the case at hand, the caring exchange of substances with others : such as preparing meals *with* Maggi cubes for them.

That the emergence of such intercalations between the global food industry and local ways of feeding and caring is not a foregone conclusion is equally clear. Just think of the protests in India in 2015 – including the mass burnings of millions of noodle packets (Fry, 2016 but see also Baviskar's 2018 nuanced analysis). Here, Indian consumers enraged over the alleged heavy MSG and lead contents of Maggi's noodle flavor sachets, collectively disenrolled Maggi noodle soups from a hitherto flourishing network to re-establish what E.P. Thompson (1971) might have called "the moral economy of the Indian crowd". Culminating as it did, in both legal bans and massive bonfires, this case should teach us a lesson.

In sum, what the materials we discussed here seem to amount to is a striking illustration of the way in which heterogeneity – local culinary diversity, if you will – can and does (nowadays perhaps even must!), coexist with structural homogenization and market consolidation on a global scale. Brand diversification does allow the consumer a degree of latitude in "the work of appropriation" of commodities into his or her desired form of life. By the same token, this very "freedom" to choose is ultimately a function of corporate interests geared towards expanding their market share. Nevertheless, and harkening back to our theoretical guides Nancy and Simondon, we might still say with Marx that people cook, share, and eat *their own food* – just not under conditions of their choosing, but ones that happen to co-appear as historical (and therefore changing) solutions to their needs, wants, aesthetic desires and realistic aspirations. Of course, much of the stakes are set by local governments, financial institutions, agricultural policies, global market structures, corporate investment policies, and advertising campaigns. But even if we were to take capitalist industrial expansion and hegemony as an unmitigated evil, we might still agree with John Dewey (1934/1958, p.14), who believed that "in a growing life, the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed". There is a political ontology (not just economy!) in all of this (Law, 2019), and Maggi cubes (or similar such products) may help us put this on the table, exposing as they do, the necessary plurality of origins, networks, explanations, and meanings of aesthetic experience. Excepting the direst of "entitlement failures" as Amartya Sen (1981) has called the structural inability to obtain desired (or even only necessary) goods, the ways in which people worldwide toss or crumble Maggi cubes into whatever they regard as proper, dignified food is a decision that is theirs to make. A reason for hope, we think.

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Fittedness of home. Sensorial and somatic dynamics in the era of IKEA homes

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Abstract: *This study consists of concentric layers that surround, like spheres, the central topic of home. The home is understood as a core reference point for late capitalist consumer lifestyles. The paper argues that its central status is symptomatically manifested and can, therefore, be analyzed through how IKEA engages with everyday life. Discourses drawn from art, consumer culture theories, somaesthetics, and sensory studies are factored in to revolve around this topic. Each discourse is examined individually and in combination to determine how it fits the task of rethinking the home.*

Keywords*: aesthetic capitalism, home, IKEA, John Cage*

1. Is this kitchen for dancing?

On February 5, 1959, a memorable phenomenon occurred in the Milan-based television quiz show, "Lascia o Radoppia" (Leave it or Double it). A foreign contestant in his late 40s, presented as a mushroom expert and composer of unconventional pieces, had already appeared on screen several times by that time and returned this evening for the 640.000 Lire question. Before the game, he was given the opportunity to premiere a new experimental piece of work he composed. At this moment, the situation turned more than unusual: instead of being equipped with conventional instruments, the studio stage was set with all kinds of homeware utensils like a (filled) bathtub, vibrating toy fish, pressure cooker, a bottle of spirits with small glass, a seltzer bottle, ice cubes (and an electric mixer to crush them), rubber duck, a bouquet in a vase, watering can, a water-friendly whistle, and the like. Those items were staged with a grand piano, five radios, a tape machine, and, most importantly, a stopwatch. Alongside the unique "instrumentation"—a seemingly haphazard assortment of belongings from a middle-class home of a late 50s American suburbia—the performance required its performer to walk in infinite zigzag tracks between the items and make them sound according to a presumably premeditated performance plan to be realized through the total control of timing aided by the only non-sounding instrument of the piece: the stopwatch.

The majority of the audience, both in the studio space and most probably at home as well, laughed aloud at this strange apparition, which, however, was intended to showcase more than an amusement attraction. It aimed to trigger a meditative reflection on what might happen if an autonomous aesthetic turn were infused into the everyday practice of humdrum domestic

activities. The piece's composer was none other than the then-already notorious John Cage. The performance was entitled *Water Walk* (1959)—an enigmatic biblical reference in the era of universal canalization, where every step on the pavement is a step above the underground water pipe and sewer network. The performance created an ambiguous and critical collage of the state-of-the-art home environment through its scenery, comparable to that of the famous contemporary collage work of Richard Hamilton (*Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* 1956). It merged all its paraphernalia into a funny and quirky witches' kitchen.[1]

Astutely chosen, all the objects involved were representative symbols of the postwar economic boom and the accompanying improvements in living conditions: the stage of *Water Walk* is a home environment stripped of its architectural backdrop, which brings to the fore typical household consumer goods that bear either cultural, technical, or utility valor. Piano, domestic flowers, and radios demonstrate home as the center of cultural life taken in the broadest sense. They refer to a place where cultural expressions are created and arrive from the outside world, and symbolic metabolisms can take place, primarily in the living and dining rooms. Other items in the collage, such as the bathtub, toy fish, and rubber duck, manifest the infantile comfort and playfulness of the modern, hot water-powered bathroom and its ultimate intimacy devoid of any superintending gaze. In contrast, the kitchenware utensils at play represent efficiency, sophisticated engineering, and a universal design solutionism so typical of the political-economic optimism that fueled the 50s in the West. They are also in line with the changing social role models of women—partly still being held captive by house chores, partly occupying ever more domains in the spectrum of professions. Amongst those paraphernalia, the protagonist—a male by no coincidence —is to perform a busy choreography. The whole phenomenon might leave the audience with an impression of utter disorderliness and scrambling, which might also prove to be an eerie or even graceful sequence. The ambiguity of this choreography stems mainly from its impersonal temporality—the performer, despite his bodily proximity, has only indirect contact with the environment, as all his gestures are subject to the prescribed agenda of actions controlled by the stopwatch, just like the archer's manual connection with his bow and arrow, which are not directly and rudimentarily grabbed in their physical reality, but through the mediation of the heightened attention fixed on the target. The symbolic embracing and situating quality that belongs to homeyness—a central tenet of the anthropologist Grant McCracken (2005)—prevails here in temporal planning, rather than the conventional spatial order.

Thus, on the one hand, the performer embodies a persona akin to Raoul Haussman's assemblage portrait of the *Mechanischer Kopf* (1919), which captures a human state invaded by technology. It is the everyman struggling under the constant pressure of time amid a plethora of civilizational achievements, euphemistically labelled today as *multitasking*. This has a depersonalizing and haunting effect on the performance. On the other hand, however, the performer's bodily presence and his whole material environment might prove to be a manifestation of poetic power, a charming realization of the Kleistian puppetry applied to consumerist ordinariness in which household chores transfigure into a mysterious dance that follows the playbook of a higher order, while at the same time ties > tying the subject back to its bodily realities, the inner order of its regularly pulsating soma. It is as if the material compound of the home and its subordinated inhabitant would be in need of salvation by an involvement in an orderly, designed procession that transfigures the ordinary and utilitarian

1 No audiovisual documentation of the premiere has survived, but its second performance in January 1960 in a similar American TV show has been conserved and is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXOIkT1-QWY

dimensions of their existence. This procession should go beyond mere beautifying procedure; rather, it should be a transformation, which engulfs into its vortex everything that is living, moving, or at least movable (every sound is a movement by resonance); thus, being at home may become a celebration, a carnival, and a rediscovery of the soma as the performer must pay heightened attention to the precision and timing of his movements similar to the ones of an athlete, while consciously activating his muscle groups and overcoming bodily inertia when handling the ordinary objects of the home.

From today's perspective, Cage's performance might also be seen as a send-up of the lifestyle trend that understands the kitchen as a place of fun and dancing. This trend has been appearing in many forms in consumer culture, for instance, on the book cover of the Canadian nutrition celebrity Karlene Karst, who entitled her latest cookbook, *This Kitchen is for Dancing* (2019). The choice to name the kitchen activity "dancing" refers to more than providing posh and healthy foods. Instead, it is about creating a nurturing and vibrant communal atmosphere to take kitchen presence as an opportunity for rich and broad family life or an occasion for other interpersonal interactions, thus rendering life at home an aesthetically and morally uplifting reality that follows individual choreography in a private proscenium.

Cage's performance, however, is less about a more satisfying everyday life than about a utopian alternative to it, one that achieves greater autonomy. Nonetheless, what his performance demonstrates is not absolute autonomy. It avoids the hubris of the subject's total agency; instead, it is content to claim a higher degree of freedom from the passivity of modern consumer life.[2] This demand is supported by the altered sensorial relation the performer establishes with the chaotically accumulated pool of objects. Not only are their functional purpose, economic value, meaning in life, interrelations, and hierarchies of their social status suspended, but their sensorial features are also redefined. The configuration of the audible, the visual, the tactile, and the palatable undergoes a substantial change, resulting in an altered human presence. For those who received the performance as a farce, this alteration must have been no more than a frisson, a fleeting shock. For those who took the performance as a miracle play, this sensorial change is a symptom of resistance, a redefinition of human presence, and a revision of what home might be. Cage's approach presents a home as a field of action, rooms for maneuver. His performance piece poses the question: What is it that controls and organizes domestic space? His answer unmistakably indicates a consumerist ideal of life that pairs with the ever-wilder and conflicting co-habitation that works between human inhabitants and their accumulated stuff, utensils, gadgets, and consumables that have been efficiently fobbed off on them and are believed to be indispensable in a decent home. The tactical aspect of Cage's performance is a demonstration that the all-too-familiar everyday settings and routines might be reorganized under the auspices of a more autonomous choreography.

In this sense, Cage's vision of the choreographically saved life is profoundly different from the contemporary slogan of "this kitchen is for dancing" that beams from home surfaces announcing playfully the ideals of the current design capitalism (Szentpéteri, 2019) that matches unpaid domestic work with entertainment. An example of those appearances is the poster inscription that was mounted on the wall in a kitchen interior of a Budapest IKEA store in 2024, inviting the visitor's imagination with the verbatim quotation of the above line: "this kitchen is for dancing". According to what I will explain in what follows, IKEA seems to be proposing by this wall inscription the spontaneous aestheticization of everyday domestic

2 McCracken (2005, 44) is right when he claims that goods purchased at the market, against all beliefs in passive consumerism, definitely acquire new and individual local value and frame of perception when they get involved in a home; still, prosumerism is taken to a much higher level by Cage in an era of blossoming conformism.

situations and their enhancement by play; hence, their intensification through complementing the fashioned furnishing and paraphernalia with aesthetically charged performances. Opposed, however, to what Cage's vision captures, where a home becomes a place of spiritual-sensory-somatic reorganization, according to what IKEA proposes, a home is a place of a more prosaic aestheticization and becoming aestheticized.

The fundamental difference between the ambitions of the Cage work and the contemporary lifestyle guidelines embodied in IKEA's proposal—although distant in time, both of which are variations on the same impulse to mitigate civilizational harms—lies in how they interpret playfulness and the aesthetic. After all, Cage labels his performance as a miracle, regardless of how ambivalent and ironic or carnivalistic it is. The idea of walking on water is a blatant biblical allusion. At the same time, it goes beyond a mere parody as it exemplifies how people may rise above the everyday flooded with consumerist objects. The presentation of this rise is like the celebration of a ritual in which a sensory transfiguration of the material world occurs: the many different things designed for rational purposes become artful acoustic sources, stimuli for a contemplative state. In this transfiguration, sensory shift plays a primary role. What was conceived for grabbing, holding, handling, operating, and switching on and off now is lending itself to being listened to; also, it invites our sense of rhythm. Even the nature of the human movement is becoming transfigured. What was subject to the needs of expediency and efficiency now acquires a certain autonomy, the proprioceptive qualities associated with movement execution are valorized, and the felt-bodily presence is brought closer to the experience of the athlete and the dancer.

To sum up, Cage's stage evokes a home. His performance piece can be read as a poetic, pseudo-ritual proposal for how being at home, and becoming someone through the home (see McCracken, 2005), might be realized in an alternative way within and against consumer society. In what follows, I offer a glimpse into the theories about how aesthetic capitalism operates, how our sensorium and somatic routines cooperate with it, how and to what extent one might resist or dismantle the reigning lifestyle protocols and ideals of home, and what chances there are to return to a more autonomous domestic existence.

2. Aesthetic capitalism at home

In his *Critique of Aesthetics Capitalism*, Gernot Böhme (2017) provides an explanation of the operational circumstances that govern the current state of affairs in the lives of developed societies. He calls that aesthetic capitalism, which has ensnared life at home as well, despite the latter having long been seen as a refuge from the pressures of social reality.[3] Against differing theories that stem from the perspective of labor conditions (the classical Marxist approach) or from the conflict of interest between capital and welfare state (as Piketty understands), Böhme understands capitalism as an endlessly growing system of consumption—surplus consumption, to be more precise. A substantial leap that Böhme detects, a development that should be seen in hindsight as a necessity within the inner dynamics of capitalism, is the economic shift from managing needs to feeding desires. This shift is in conjunction with an essential change in the status of commodities, on the one hand, and the restructuring of everyday life, on the other, aligned to consumables of every imaginable and unimaginable kind. Böhme even claims that by now, the commodity to which once *use value* and *exchange value* was attributed has acquired

3 Comparing skyscrapers and suburban free-standing residential houses, two of the most distinctive building types of the developed economies in the 20th century, David Howes underlines that the latter, which has been developed as the ideal typical site of the home, is "an antidote to the pressures and formalities of city life." (2014, 9)

a *staging value* as its primary feature. Contrary to what was still the evidence for Marx, namely that the economy serves the reproduction of life, by now, it serves the *intensification* of life by nurturing and growing consumerist desires. Böhme picks out four central desires: (1) "the desire to equip one's life;" (2) "the desire to be seen and heard;" (3) "the desire of *fame*;" and (4) "the desire for mobility." As opposed to needs that can be satisfied, desires have no natural limit; they are always open to "something more." (20)

The surplus implied in this "something more" has a qualitative, rather than a quantitative nature. It is undefined and open—because desire is operative in the aesthetic dimension. One is longing for better, newer, more advanced equipment and less for an additional piece of something already possessed. One strives to be seen and heard in better quality and by a better audience, gaining better and more superlative feedback, not the sheer quantity of those. One wants to travel to more interesting, privileged, and envied destinations, not a multiplication of any random trip. That is why Böhme concludes that "It is no longer the case that the economy is an instrument for satisfying human needs, but, conversely, human beings transform their system of needs [exchanging them for desires] in order to satisfy the requirement of capitalist development—the need for continuous growth." (Böhme, 2017, 12) While in everyday consumption need is replaced by desire, in the functioning of capital, it remains unchanged, and there is no possibility of reducing the need for growth and lessening the urge for the capitalization of all life spheres, which is enforced efficiently through the methods of *aesthetic intensification* for arousing desires.

"Enhancement of life" is the keyword used to name the aesthetic capitalization of life that is taking place in every sphere, including the residential one, which is crucial. Enhancement, in this context, also includes the simultaneous arousal and exploitation of desires. These latter, in turn, lead in no way to a felt enrichment of one's life but instead to a spiral of discontent. As Böhme puts it: "The possibilities on offer for enhancing one's life—one's reputation, equipment, status—give people in all situation the feeling of having fallen short or, conversely, of needing to make more of an effort to improve their position." (51) One wants to live the best life possible instead of a good enough life. As a result, consumption becomes compulsive, demonstrating the power of the *performance principle*, which prevails even in the "enjoyment" of life. The efforts to overcome discontent and pursue life intensification are carried out under the auspices of *aesthetic labor*, which is multifaceted and encompasses—as Böhme puts it— "all the human activities which impart to things, people and ensembles that something more which goes beyond their physical presence and availability, their thing-ness and utility." (20)

Contrary to the delusion that aestheticization brings about a better life, the grim reality, as Böhme points out, is that the intensifications resulting from aesthetic labor have not brought freedom to either society or the individual, but have become the primary means of manipulation and capital interest. However, Böhme's analysis of how the unobstructed invasion of the aesthetic happens in daily life is not complete. As will be shown, supplementing his views with the insights gained from sensory studies and somaesthetics, the shortcomings of his take can be resolved. His elucidations are convincing from the economic and psychological perspectives, but sensory studies and somaesthetics can add relevant physiological, experiential, and cultural insights.

In a substantial paper on the sensual logic of late capitalism, David Howes (2005) begins from the same vantage point as Böhme: classical Marxist theories overlook the central status of consumption in developed economies. This lack has to be compensated by means that go beyond standard social theories since consumption, even in those theories that acknowledge its central role, is taken as a means of social aspirations in the first place. Consumption is usually

considered a personal achievement, a reference point for self-esteem and identity production,[4] and an indicator of social status. Nevertheless, the indispensable precondition for consumption is the implication of the sensorium, which, as sensory studies have convincingly revealed, is far from being an anthropological constant but rather a regime that can change and is indeed recalibrated from time to time in a dynamic historical process highly influenced by the prevailing economic and power conditions. (Classen, 1993; Howes, 2005; Smith, 2007; Howes and Classen, 2014; Howes 2014) Howes recognizes and emphasizes that the consumables—be they physical goods, environments, services, activities, or relations—and the act of consumption are bonded and correspond to each other through their coordination in the sensorium. (2005) Captivating the subjective sensory preferences and implementing those into the market offers leads to complete success among the consumers.

However, those subjective sensory preferences are far less autonomous than one might think. They are harnessed into the logic of capital, which approaches every sensory realm as a new continent to be occupied and exploited through the production of excitement. As a result of this colonization of the senses, cars can be competitively marketed by their artfully composed interior fragrance system, real estate by their potential influx of cool breezes from the neighboring pine forest, pasta by its eye-catching colors, homeware machines by the leather-like feel of their surface, lighting fixtures by their ability to adjust to circadian rhythms—readers can easily add their own experiences to this constantly growing list.

Howes captures all this with the concept of *hyperesthesia.* In hyperesthetic consumption, "body-storming" (a play on brain-storming) has become a key tool for designers: "Marketers and designers now hold 'body-storming' focus groups […] in an effort to divine the most potent sensory channel, and within each channel the most potent sensory signal, through which to distinguish their products from those of their competitors and capture the attention of potential customers. 'Perceptual positioning' now means everything to moving merchandise." (288) Beyond this tool, producers and marketers introduced further deeply body-oriented methods to stimulate consumption; these include multisensory orchestration of the experience, synesthesia, targeting the sensorial subconscious, and immersive storytelling.

Prevalence of hyperesthesia also explains why designers today focus on aesthetically fueled interaction: because it is through aesthetic experience that the fit between subject and product, the living organism and the environment can be most seamlessly achieved—an insight put forward by John Dewey a century ago with different reasons and with highly different aims in mind: "Underneath the rhythm of every art and of every work of art there lies, as a substratum in the depths of the subconsciousness, the basic pattern of the relations of the live creature to his environment." (Dewey, 1980, 150) Zygmunt Bauman, in contrast, realized, already in the early 1980s, that this human aptitude of fittedness gets channeled into the workings of consumerism when aestheticization is directed towards the preparation of the bodies to be able to accommodate the increasing amount of experiences that the production and services market wants to sell them.[5]

Despite the constant expansion of offers bombarding our senses, a kind of standardization applies, to which Guy Julier found a proper term in "neoliberal sensorium." (2017) His associated idea of the "neoliberal bodyhood" addresses the room for maneuver the living, sentient, purposive and cognizant body-mind, the soma might command within the current economic constraints. (2023) Whereas adaptation of the material and social environment to human needs

4 This view is dominant in McCracken's (2005) reasoning as well.

5 "The imperative to consume demands, above all, that the body '*be made fit* to absorb an ever-growing number of sensations the commodities offer or promise'" states Howes, quoting Bauman (via Clarke, 2003, 146)

and the betterment of life would be in line with the benevolent pragmatist tradition inherited from Dewey and his fellows, in reality, our own developed capability to adapt is the one that let us being exploited by the capital interest and power. (see also Crippen, 2023)

Adapting to what is offered, instead of claiming what is personal, is not only a typical behavioral of the petty bourgeoisie but also a reflex deeply entrenched in the body. Richard Shusterman (2017) provides an obvious yet striking example of this when he presents and explains a relatively unknown yet crucial practice of fashion studios using fit models to finalize their tailoring processes. As is well known, garments are not manufactured in every imaginable measure in an economy where the market is mediated and cannot work on personal grounds; they are only produced in standardized sizes. This circumstance results, on the one hand, from the economic pressures of mass production, and on the other, from the primacy of staging value. The fit model is quite desperate and, as Shusterman demonstrates, a highly ambivalent attempt to save, at least partially, the consumer good's reference to use value—wearability. The fit model is a hypothetical everyman, the hyper-typical body whose task in the design process is to help the creator achieve body/cloth fittedness according to the predetermined look. The use of the fit model is, however, ambivalent by necessity. However ostensibly perfect the fit, the final result might not be satisfactory for many consumers, either in terms of self-representation (the cloth does not fit well enough on their differing bodies) or self-experience (misfit is felt as discomfort).[6] It happens because "Chosen for simply being an average body, the fit model is then transformed into the somatic ideal that determines the precise cut of clothes for the entire size range of the garments he models for." (2017, 94) Shusterman is not afraid to identify this process as an inverse Platonism, where a contingent and particular body provides the transcendental form to be followed for the production, while, in turn, the generalized confection goods are supposed to showcase the individualities of their wearers of highly different bodies. Furthermore, the clothes derived from the original fit model sample are not only an ambivalent means of self-expression but also a force that corrals human behavior: "

> Studies have shown that people behave differently when they are wearing their professional outfits (such as a physician's white coat or a police uniform) even if they are off-duty and engaged in non-professional activities. As clothes are made to fit the bodies and movements of men and women, so the bodily behavior of those men and women are conversely made (through training or implicit learning) to fit the meanings of those clothes." (99)

The particular weight of this formative capacity of clothing comes from the fact that the urge to wear emanates much less from the individual than from the producer. "We clients of clothing fashion think that we choose our designers, but they have already chosen us [according to our economic status, and also through the body ideals their fit models embody], which is why we prefer their clothes." (100).

Emanuele Coccia (2024) emphasizes that clothes and home cannot be thought of separately. Through dress, home—as an expression of its inhabitant—steps out into the public, and conversely, the home is a vastly enlarged dress. Home and clothes are homologous because both are not only expressions and indicators of our subjectivity, but also extensions of it. Clothes and home are manifestations of the dynamically changing notion of comfort and happiness we all have.[7] (see also Rybczynski 1986) Coccia's idea of twinning home and clothes is not without

6 Somaesthetics differentiates between *experiential* and *representational* dimensions of the somatic practice, adding, however, that "there is an inevitable complementarity of representations and experience, of outer and inner." (Shusterman, 1999, 306)

7 Coccia writes, "Thanks to cloths, the home stretches beyond its walls; it continues into a sort of mobile extraterritoriality which follows every minimal movement of our body with infinite precision. Thanks to clothes, in effect, we never leave home; we carry it around with us,

precedent, of course, as Gottfried Semper has already compared and conjoined textiles and architectural spaces in the 19th century, stating, "the beginning of building coincides with the beginning of textiles." (2004, 247)[8]

Here, we can return to the initial questions arising from John Cage's performance example: What is a home for? What is the existential latitude it might provide? What impact might be exerted on the rhythms, moves, vectors of attention, and habits in everyday life by those ensembles of objects constituting the space its resident inhabits? To what extent can one expect the home as a refuge from the performance pressures of consumerist everyday life? Is there any chance to equip a home with all the latest consumerist goods while avoiding subjugating it to impersonal capitalist forces and the reigning ideas of normativity? Is there a way to resist the pressures imposed upon domestic life enforced by our commanding desires to be equipped, seen, and listened to, garnering recognition, and possessing a recharger hinterland for our come and go in the outer world?

3. Live on the IKEA stage

These questions might be approached in many ways. In what follows, I address them by considering how IKEA, the largest company in furniture and home furnishing worldwide,[9] participates in people's domestic lives, more precisely, how it influences their ideas and visions of home.[10] One of the pioneers in studying IKEA ethnographically, Pauline Garvey (2018), provides an insightful account of how people of the consuming masses became used to tying their lives to IKEA in their homebuilding urges. Conversely, she also shows how IKEA managed to achieve a social perception, due to which this company is the first idea that pops into many people's minds when furnishing a home. Garvey concentrates above all on the exhibit sections of the IKEA stores. These have historical roots on the one side in trade fairs and home expos, while on the other in open-air ethnographic exhibitions (the paradigm of which is the Swedish Skansen), that is, in musealized forms of past everyday life. In harmony with those historical patterns, for IKEA exhibits, the stakes are to imbue the audience with an alternative of their lives through a mock-up home, into which they are directly invited to animate it not only through imagination but more so by physical engagement. This event, which is both contemplative and action-oriented, is in many ways similar to trying on a new outfit. Putting on the garment, one wants to check the effects on self-image and self-presentation and, at the same time, the fittedness, the lived bodily experience through the garment, which provides mediation between the self and the material outside world. Likewise, the IKEA store invites the public to take furniture and objects on display as they would do to clothes in a fitting room, except that homes are typically interpersonal environments, so it is more appropriate to try them within a dynamic presence of human multiplicity.

One might ask whether IKEA settings are based on the realities of the audience's living conditions and their evident needs. The answer is ambiguous. On the one hand, IKEA interiors are indeed inspired by real-life situations.[11] Thus, they intentionally "strive for the familiar"

we transform it into a kind of second skin. Thanks to clothes, homes are transformed from immense containers into sleek and supple vehicles through which we shelter from the world." (70)

8 This idea is maintained also by the architect and author, Witold Rybczynski (2001, 21).

9 https://www.statista.com/topics/1961/ikea/

10 The intention to influence is far from hidden, as one could read about it on a previous company website: "Inspiration is free: Visit an IKEA store and sit, lie down, test, touch and try things out. Look inside our closets and under our beds. (Who knows what good ideas you'll find there.) Even if you walk away empty-handed, you'll be taking home a whole lot of fresh ideas" (recorded and quoted in Garvey, 2018, 37)

11 Their annual *Life at Home Report* is but one evidence of it. https://lifeathome.ikea.com/about/

(Cirelli, 2012, 68) and are in line with what Dalibor Vesely claims as the final referent of the humanistic new design: "the typical situation." (2004) On the other hand, their suggestions are heading towards a hyper-real everyday life: where everything fits together nicely; where the apartment and its occupant are like a hand in a glove; where things work softly and are tamed to your hands; where orderliness is not a temporary result of cleaning but axiomatic; where lights and warmth are enjoyed on demand and are not confined by utility bills; where the audible is not the unclear mixture of your own household's noise and that of the neighbor; and finally, where the temporal pressure of everyday activities is forgotten or gets suspended. The IKEA showroom settings are hyper-real homes; hence they can affect the actual life of which they are copies. They do it in a hybrid way, merging a quasi-autonomous lifestyle exhibition with the marketing practice of a highly profitable commercial enterprise, precisely in line with how "staging value" (Böhme, 2017) should come into effect in aesthetic capitalism.

However, this hyper-reality should not be made conscious. What IKEA showrooms are supposed to display is nothing less than an elevated but feasible idea of home and domesticity. They accomplish this through their carefully selected product assemblages accompanied by fleeting traces of individual lives (notes, photographs, clothes). When IKEA showcases its convincing suggestions on how to achieve "a better everyday life"—to quote the founder, Ingvar Kamprad's verbiage (1976)—it comes as no surprise that the re-designed home interiors go hand in hand with social normalization (where state and corporate aspirations converge, see Kristoffersson, 2014). Of course, this normalization agenda is hidden from the customer's view because the immediate visitor experience is more about abundance and diversity.[12] The exhibited model apartments are supplied with furniture and homeware of different materials, colors, styles, and ambiances targeted to differing consumer groups, like families, singles, DINK couples, pensioners, downtowners, suburbanites, countrymen, working-class people, white-collar workers, yuppies, bobos, technophiles, eco-savvy people, travelers, hipsters, and creatives. A clear taxonomy cannot be extracted from such a social tableau, but systematicness is unnecessary for an impulse-based marketing strategy anyway. What is really needed is an inviting narrative and a multisensory experience that offers immersion.

IKEA showrooms deliver both impeccably. In 2024, during fieldwork with students from the Moholy-Nagy University of Art & Design, we detected twelve simultaneous offers for envisioning a better home.[13] In each case, upon entering the given showroom, the visitor can read a general introduction supposedly written by "the absent dwellers" of the exhibited home about their life routines and their primary values. This introduction addresses the visitor in a succinctly written first-person narrative prose printed on an A4 size paper, mounted on the wall, similar to an artist's statement in an exhibition space. These notes are, of course, pseudo in nature, as if the jest of a witty curator who invented the exhibited artist at once with her artworks and artist's statement, or the deception of an imposter anthropologist who showcases a fictional ethnic group as a recently discovered one. Regardless of their fictitiousness, the narratives attached to the home mock-ups add enhanced make-believe and provide the feel of credibility to the material presence that the interior design composition realizes. The cooperation between words and sensory effects results in a life scene, a *tableau vivant* that powerfully engages the imagination and calls for bodily immersion. (Garvey, 2018, 46) "Trying on" a home environment here emphatically means a simultaneous corporeal and interpretive insertion into a lifestyle

12 One might add, however, what Howes claims as "seeming diversity of options" is the precise description of the situation (Howes, 2014, 11).

13 Since the in-town Budapest store where this fieldwork took place is the smallest in the country, there is a high chance that one can encounter even more lifestyle offers in bigger ones. Not to mention, IKEA megastores like the one on Kungens Kurva in Stockholm, as well as IKEA's central website, feature many lifestyle variations under the umbrella of "ideas and inspiration."

proposal, practicing a somatic empathy, and foretasting a future possibility of the self.

In fact, through somatic empathy, the possibility of an alternative home choreography becomes tangible, one that arises from altered physical and symbolic relations, materials, scales, or new functions and combinations. These features exert definitive influence over the feel of orientation, supported movement directions, the rhythms of positive and negative space, potential spatial nodes of emotional gravity, dynamics of sensorium, premonition of what is shareable and what might be kept private, the pace and temporal features the given interior supports, the practical or symbolical affordances one might discover, and similar motives, which are constitutive of how domesticity is envisioned, even unconsciously. (see also Franco, 2019) However, the same risk threatens the visitor as that which is often the case with trying on a dress out of context, leading to dissatisfaction upon wearing it outside the fitting room. The act of somatic empathy that takes place in the showroom quickly makes one forget that one's living space never really ends at the perimeters of the residence. (McCracken 2005, 29–33) However, it includes, to an elementary extent, the immediate and broader neighborhood, the location within the environment, also the natural and climatic conditions—not to mention how the given home is located within a more abstract social landscape, how it is consistent with the social perceptions about the dweller and the neighborhood.

Beyond subjective interpretation and individual experience of the lifestyles offered in the showrooms, regardless of the diversity thereof, IKEA settings share some common features: their imagined inhabitants are youthful (regardless of their actual age), lively, resourceful, capable, and creative, and they do not lack humor. In the language of materials and functions, these are mirrored in the use of clear-cut shapes, smooth and clear surfaces, firm articulation, intense ambiance, blonde woods, raw timber, all-absorbent storage solutions, easy connectivity, flexible configurations, multi-usability, and radiant rationality.[14] Furthermore, the imagined inhabitants' general virtues and attitudes manifest in their living spaces' sensorial, proxemic, and proprioceptive parameters and the habits through which they occupy those spaces. All these trickle into the audience's perception and imagination so efficiently that Garvey feels it necessary to state that in certain societies, "it is the avoidance of Ikea goods that requires active effort rather than their acquisition." (2018, 95) She also points out that "Ikea showrooms actively orchestrate a holistic experience, encouraging shopper engagement with the items on display and providing a tightly choreographed experience based on sensorial engagement." (13) The resulting normative models are complex. They do not necessarily determine the exact appearance of the home but rather promote consumer behavior that is interested in coordinating details, composing the stylistic unity of the dwelling, and upgrading the always all-too-soon-obsolete existing conditions.

The symbolic rise, one might say skyrocketing, of the kitchen that has occurred in recent decades is a good example of how the domestic life choreographies promoted by IKEA showrooms and imagery have been ingrained in the social realm, boosting a lifestyle that exerts playful and aesthetically ambitious control over one's belongings. (Ledin and Machin, 2017 and 2018) As a result, the kitchen, often conjoined with a dining area or the whole living room, has transcended its historically more modest status and become a central, multifunctional, multilateral, interpersonal, hybrid place, a real centerstage of the domestic life where nutrition

14 In Garvey's account, perhaps the most important item in the IKEA universe is storage, which is the key to transforming a home inconspicuously into a depository full of equipment associated with the different activities the inhabitants want to practice. The storage serves to organize things properly, eliminate their randomness, and fit them into intentional compositional relationships, thus avoiding their presence as mere sediments of life. Just as the inhabitants of neoliberal capitalism must lead an efficient and performance-oriented life, their living spaces must also reflect these principles: everything is optimized or should be so. Garvey also points out that a clean surface can only be maintained through constant struggle; thus, the reality of invisible and unpaid work and emotional engagement is implicit in the aesthetic regime of "decluttering." (2018, 104)

and dialogue, care and labor, pleasure and study, need and desire, inhabitant and visitor, constant and unexpected occurrences meet in an open contingency.[15] The same kitchen counter serves as the place for immersing after a stressful day in individual kitchen to-dos, cooking together playfully with our partner, or having a good chat with a visitor while nibbling on something, filling out bills under good lights, enjoying the view of the kids from that vantage point as they play in the living area; discussing a work issue with a colleague who just popped in; or simply, pondering and daydreaming. (Fawzy, 2019)

This hybridization has brought new freedom and flexibility compared to previous kitchen paradigms, in which it was a segregated, more functional, and restricted space, akin to a self-contained organ within the body of the home. Its newer nodal role makes it more akin to the nervous system.[16] At the same time, beyond its new freedom and flexibility, the kitchen of aesthetic capitalism also favors the neoliberal principles to maximize performance: while you're talking, you can chop onions; while the eggs are boiling, you can pay the bills, etc. (Fawzy, 2019) Physical and spatial proportions, ergonomics, the density of objects, and proxemics are devised to fit perfectly to the options the repertory of commonly accepted kitchen behaviors consists of. The freedom of choice neatly hides the limitations of the finite number of scripts and choreographies. The inhabitant may feel that he or she fits nicely into the kitchen environment provided by IKEA, while this fit is more of a testimony to the fact that IKEA has successfully adapted the customer to the catalog of life choreographies it promotes. What Garvey claims about storage applies here, too: the subject of aesthetic capitalism wants, above all, to exercise control over objects and environments designed to enhance and intensify his or her life (a dialectic of controlling the control) while he/she plays from the playbook of efficiency (a second-degree dialectic of controlledness through exercising control). Efficiency is internalized; it prevails through the felt sense of control and coordination, and by today, both have become somaesthetic components, even a precondition, of the sense of "being at home."[17]

In case one thinks the stunningly aestheticized, intensified, hybridized IKEA kitchen transforms its owner too much into a dummy of a neoliberal homescape, then it is time to pose a travesty of the Hamiltonian question: *Just what is it that makes Cage's kitchen so different, so appealing?* The answer may seem complicated due to the many apparent similarities between the IKEA and the Cage kitchen. Like the IKEA kitchens, the kitchen that Cage's performance conjures is aesthetically highly organized (it turns the entire home into an instrumentarium), intensified (as for the alienation effect it exerts), enhanced (as new functions it invents), and utterly hybridized (as it blends the concept of a public stage and an interior, and unites the separate rooms of a home into a Frankenstein place). Cage's kitchen, too, places its resident in a highly occupied and multitasking state, so no distance between the player and the role can be maintained, just like in the case of the enlivened dummy.[18] However, the underlying difference between those stylized kitchens—that of Cage and IKEA—is their inverse relation to determinacy and choice. While the IKEA dummy is doomed to choose between the finite number of building blocks the company secures for creating the desired homescape and also

15 Rybczynski (1986, 73) warns, however, that already "In the [17th-century] Dutch home the kitchen was the most important room." The consequences of that, including the changing roles women played in the history of home, also the regularly occurring countervailing trends, are explained in detail in his informative book.

16 What Shusterman (2019) writes about the somatic foundations and references of urban space and architecture can be extended to the smaller-scale spatial aspects of the home. Emanuele Coccia (2024) has recently taken notable steps in this direction.

17 "Conforming to the ideology of home as a bastion for individuality and intimacy, for unique expression and singularisation, it is nevertheless striking that it is here that the detritus of intimate routines is most rigorously patrolled," Garvey notes (2018, 119).

18 This aspect is mirrored in the artist's commentary: "... I ... rehearsed very carefully, over and over and over again with people watching me and correcting me, because I had to do it in three minutes. It had many actions in it, and it demanded what you might call virtuosity. I was unwilling to perform it until I was certain that I could do it well." (Kirby and Schechner, 1965, 62)

from the finite repertory of activities and choreographies that fit well into that homescape, Cage's protagonist is strictly regulated by the script of the piece whose notation, however, leaves the musical aspects relatively indeterminate and through this gesture invites for a potentially infinite poetic re-framing or redefinition of the home and its associated spectrum of actions. While in the first case, the freedom of choice is encircled by the pressure of capital, in the second case, the imperative of an indeterminate creation opens up the space. Fittedness means conformity through lifestyle in the first case, while in the second case, it is an open symbiosis, an empowering entanglement with the material world.

In reality, the inhabitant's expected or hoped-for fit in the styled and equipped home often fails or remains deficient, just like the perfect fit of fashionable attire optimized for fit models rather than random consumers remains somewhat off. One tries to fit into the hyper-typical home promoted by IKEA showrooms and the associated visual imageries. However, the experience resembles, to a great extent, that of fashion consumption, where only the body of the fit model is hyper-typical.[19] The outfit optimized for that body will not fit anyone else perfectly. In these cases, aesthetic capitalism shows its invalidity for the disappointed consumer, similar to how the glass slippers disappointed Cinderella's stepsisters (i.e. they did not fit). The end result of consumption—not necessarily recognized and admitted—is a lack of satisfying aesthetic experience and life enhancement, the expectation of which initially triggered and fueled the desire for consumption. Both with fashion garments and stylish interiors, the fleeting fittedness is realized only as a correspondence between the products' display value and our desires, rather than a correspondence between the objects, on the one hand, and the sentient, intentful, and intelligent body-mind, including its kinaesthetic range, proprioceptive feel, and self-fashioning, on the other.

4. Visions of resistance and reinvention

At a certain point in Cage's performance piece, an unexpected development occurs: the performer creates a series of booming sound effects by pushing the transistor radios off the kitchen table. Although acoustically speaking, these sound events fit smoothly into the overall soundscape of the piece, nonetheless, they are unexpected, stirring, and have a symbolic meaning. They might express malaise in a media culture that threatens the intimate microcosm of the home, and they even perform a gesture of resistance. A similarly thunderous and much more intense gesture of resistance occurs in Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club*. At some point in his life, the IKEA-obsessed protagonist—waist-deep in a consumption quagmire—gets fed up with his lifestyle. He takes drastic measures to tackle his malaise: he lets a gas leak blow up his fancy condo. The enumeration of the resulting loss is acute and precise on different levels:

> Something which was a bomb, a big bomb, had blasted my clever Njurunda coffee tables in the shape of a lime green yin and an orange yang that fit together to make a circle. Well, they were splinters, now.

19 In the housing context this problem is inherited from earlier positions of modernism that provided the idea of the home as "a machine for living in" (Le Corbusier) that should provide decent universal living conditions to everyone. Rybczynski draws attention to the fact that two decades before Le Corbusier's debut in the 1920s, Ellen Richards, founder of the home economics movement and pioneering ecofeminist, formulated analogous demands among markedly different conceptual frameworks when she claimed that "the house as a home is merely outer clothing, which should fit as an overcoat should, without wrinkles and creases that show their ready-made character," thus "anticipating—by twenty years—Le Corbusier's statement that 'one can be proud of having a house as serviceable as a typewriter.'" (1986, 190) The similarities between the overcoat and the typewriter, argues Rybczynski, are, however, far more modest than their differences are—Richards realized that domestic activities are way more complex and personal than factory procedures, and there is not one 'correct' way of doing things at home; "that was why Richards imagined the house as clothing, which should be fitted to the individual." (Rybczynski, 1986, 191)

> My Haparanda sofa group with the orange slip covers, design by Erika Pekkari, it was trash, now.
> And I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue.
> We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern. Mine fell fifteen stories, burning, into a fountain.
> We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper. Mine are confetti.
> All that sitting in the bathroom.
> The Alle cutlery service. Stainless steel. Dishwasher safe.
> The Vild hall clock made of galvanized steel, oh, I had to have that.
> The Klipsk shelving unit, oh, yeah.
> Hemlig hat boxes. Yes.
> The street outside my high-rise was sparkling and scattered with all this. The Mommala quilt-cover set. Design by Tomas Harila […]
> It took my whole life to buy this stuff.
> The easy-care textured lacquer of my Kalix occasional tables.
> My Steg nesting tables.
> You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug.
> Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you. (Palahniuk, 1996, 43–44)

Cage's and Palahniuk's poetic visions address how "being at home" can be envisioned and enacted differently in a consumer society. Pauline Garvey and many more IKEA scholars are pondering the potential for resistance against the lifestyle protocols suggested by the hegemonic actors of the home furnishing industry. Guy Julier is seeking the possibilities of escaping the neoliberal bodyhood imposed upon the individual through urbanism, architecture, infrastructure, objects, and services. In a similar vein, David Howes considers ways to overcome the capitalization of the senses. Richard Shusterman initiates *pragmatic* somaesthetics that can critically assess hidden agendas and the undiscovered potentials in various self-fashioning practices, including housing practices. Finally, Gernot Böhme's proposal to return to *oikonomika* is evidence of the same search for alternatives. This final section provides a brief overview of the above.

Duplication, more precisely, transformational mimesis, as Michael Taussig (2018) conceptualizes it, is an essential feature of IKEA lifestyle exhibits. These settings act as vivid imitations of life. At the same time, conversely, they invite the consumer to mimic the gestures that come to life in and from them, to indulge in the metamorphosis the process of imitation implicates. This means duplication that engenders duplication. In contrast, Palahniuk's novel subverts and complicates the trope of duplication by conflating it with schism. In turn, John Cage's performance piece mimics and replicates life on various levels. One level is its carnivalistic dimension, a sonic parody of middle-class family life of the postwar new suburbia, and a pastiche of busy housewifery (executed by a male from a non-exposed gay background). However, the piece also incorporates another dimension of mimesis, through which it enters into a more-

than-human sound ecology and reenchants the everyday *Lebenswelt*.

In contrast to the poetic imitations artists deliver, Pauline Garvey (2018) finds that society has significantly less leeway to avoid the coercive influence of IKEA (and similar companies) on home furnishing and the choreographies of domestic life. For her, the realistic range of options includes only strategies for mitigating or counterbalancing those effects, such as mixing and matching consumerist items with items inherited from past generations or found at flea markets, garage sale events, and salvaged from bulky household waste collections. Garvey points out that IKEA is located on the axis of ordinary/extraordinary. This makes it possible for residents to blend their newly bought products into the background of their existing homescape, thereby allowing the home to regain, to some extent, its status as a primary hub in the network of interpersonal relations. This way, they maintain a better stance for themselves, leaving it to the objects to fit in rather than vice versa.

Compared to Garvey, Guy Julier pays attention to broader environments, such as neighborhoods and even whole cities, as the defining frameworks of human dwelling. He conducts "performances or interactions" (2023, 127), which he interprets as "embodied and experimental ethnographic exploration" (130). These are implemented as atypical bodily gestures to grasp intersections of the sensorium, embodied practices, design, and capital interest. In one of his performances, he tries to find "his" half-a-square centimeter of space in a modern shopping center in Helsinki based on the fact that the pension investment institution to which he is a regular contributor possesses 15% shares of the mall's leasable spaces. In another act, he covers a sixty-meter stretch of footpath in an hour, thus underscoring the capitalist imperative of individually managing and exploiting the units of time that contrasts with experiencing time as continuity. His slow motion leads to a re-rhythmization of body and movement, and an altered experience of locomotion and goal-orientedness, although in a substantially different sense than it happens in Cage's performance. In such actions, Julier makes accessible a peculiar and ironic version of "augmented reality" through embodied tracing of abstract relations. The latter are experienced in flesh-and-blood circumstances rather than distanced desk research.

Likewise, the project of somaesthetics suggests the rehabilitation of practice in order to better cope with the challenges related to our abilities, our degree of freedom, and our prospects for a better life. A central premise of somaesthetics is that self-knowledge, self-care, self-fashioning, right action, and practicing the art of living—requirements of the good life—are highly dependent on our conscious cultivation of the body and the unconscious customs and ingrained routines we live along. (Shusterman, 1999) Its Deweyan legacy also teaches us that the body of the living creature cannot be treated as a separate entity from its immediate environments, both natural and social. Although everyone indeed leads their life within abstract and mediated relations, such as culture, society, the state, city, municipality, and the like, in the strict sense of the word, one's home is where one lives and from where one's life emerges. That is true regardless of how much the history of philosophy has neglected, marginalized, or ignored the question of the home, always emphasizing the question of the *civitas* or *politeia* instead.[20] Home was seen, like the body, the feminine, and the animal, as a background against which human dignity would stand out through politics. In this regard, the kitchen—the center stage of both Cage's piece and the IKEA universe—is no other than the venue for feeding the political animal to maintain the capacity to participate in the affairs of the polis. Any re-consideration of the kitchen, and inseparable from it, the home in its totality, should be conjoined with a reinvention and restructuring of the ideals of life. In this regard, both somaesthetic analysis and

20 "Cities are, literally, uninhabitable," claims Emanuele Coccia (2024, 4), adding that "the only true and absolute citizens are the homeless, the clochards." (5) His book is an intriguing thought experiment on the dismantling and rebuilding of the concept of home.

practice can provide a critical orientation.

One inevitable and initial task in this effort is reassessing the sensory operations that characterize life in late capitalism. David Howes (2005) asks what can be done to combat sensory and physical fixations that reign in everyday consumption. His answer to the question points to one precondition and three important consequences. As he says, "Consumption is an *active* (not a passive) process, where all sorts of meanings and uses for products are generated that the designers and marketers of those products never imagined." (294) Initiatives and reconfigurations within the sensory sphere play an indispensable part in this. Although the sensorium is highly influenced by socially and politically engineered interrelations between the self and the environment, it is not fully controlled. The latent and unrealized potentials can be actuated. "The best antidote, I suggest, is sensitive-training," claims Howes,[21] referring to such practices as the highly somaesthetic Japanese behavioral regimen of *jikkan* or the German consumption climate of *Ostalgie,* which is charged with historical feelings. We can talk not only about sensitive-training or re-educating the senses but also about the rethinking and rediscovery of the sensory life as such. Parallel to hyperesthetic energies that have entirely eclipsed the former pragmatic use-value of commodities, on the consumption side, use might become more flexible to take an uncalculated, uncontrolled, 'poetic' turn in which *creative misuse* can powerfully counteract hegemonic forms of consumption. Creative misuse implies also that, while the gesture may seem affirmative towards the market—since the product is bought—this behavior undermines the latter precisely through the differing usage. In this case, valorization or value enhancement—which is an expectation of capital—is not done in the public sphere of the market but is taking place in the very sphere of the usage.

Finally, Gernot Böhme (2017) also writes about the possibilities of resisting the overwhelming power of aesthetic capitalism. His proposals are both general and more directly related to the problem of the home. His central insight—in full concert with Shusterman and Howes—is that the aesthetic character of present-day capitalism should be overcome precisely by aesthetic measures.[22] According to this approach, the primary action to be taken is not to condemn aesthetic labor and aesthetic effects as such, but rather to unleash the generic, anthropological potential of the aesthetic—a motive inherited from a tradition of thinking crystallized in Schiller's concept of the *Spieltrieb*. (Matherne and Riggle, 2020; 2021) It follows that the contents of the aesthetic experience are not necessarily false; they can transmit or generate real emotions and vital energies. Autonomy is not an option to be ruled out, even in the context of the aesthetic experience produced within the milieu of consumer capitalism. In this experience, regardless of whatever sphere of existence it occurs in, the integrity and wholeness of life are experienced, as well as the union of body and mind. Aesthetic awareness, which should include somaesthetic competence, is an eminent way of practicing what Michael Taussig (2020) calls mastery of non-mastery, an example of which can be seen in Cage's performance piece. It is because aesthetic awareness is not about control over perception or the perceptible, but rather embodied alertness that resists following predetermined routes concerning the content of the experience. It is an alertness that melts down fixed hierarchies.

Beyond increasing aesthetic awareness, Böhme also proposes moral and economic strategies for reclaiming a higher degree of freedom, which can lead to veering off the track from the consumerist trajectories of aesthetic capitalism and alleviating the damage of those trajectories.

21 Howes is here taking issue with Frederic Jameson's prescription – namely more "cognitive-mapping." Howes suggests that such an approach is unlikely to be able to cut through the sensory profusion of late capitalism. Fight fire with fire, fight over-stimulation with more discerning forms of sensation.

22 This demand, under the address of "aesthetic literacy", is shared also by scholars of Everyday Aesthetics, which was initiated by Yuriko Saito (2007), Katya Mandoki (2007), and others.

His moral proposals include the acquisition of virtues such as solidarity, moderation, self-restraint, autonomy, serenity—replacing dissatisfaction—and last but not least, a program of rediscovering authentic needs. From this latter, a further set of countermeasures follows: a needs management-driven recalibration of personal, individual, and communal life, in which the concept of home (*oikos*) is rethought, and the practice of domestic economy (*oikonomika*) becomes rediscovered. This would lead to a state of affairs in which genuine intimacy would be cherished through practicing mastery of non-mastery, whose poetic demonstration can be seen in Cage's performance. Its prosaic translation into daily life is a task that might be taken as an open call for today's IKEA-consuming masses striving to acquire and maintain a sense of homeyness as the eminent means to shape their identity and experience their individuality.

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Proving fear: the corporeal witness and its role in asylum seeking

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Abstract: *This article examines the cases of two Central American asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border. It argues that their bodies, marked by scars, mutilations, or other forms of trauma, emerge as credible witnesses in support of asylum seekers' claims. Through their scars, fear becomes visible, quantifiable and relatable. It further argues that despite the "objective" quality of the credible fear test, the credibility of asylum claimants' stories hinges on the acknowledgement or disavowal of their fear, suggesting the impossibility of establishing fear as an "objective fact", speaking instead to a lack of responsiveness and responsibility towards others.*

Keywords: *embodiment, acknowledgement, the credible fear test, asylum seekers, US-Mexico border, photography*

The key hit the lock. The sound signaled new arrivals waiting outside the shelter's gate. I was working the door that night. *Migrantes*[1] crowded the corridor on their way in and out of the shelter. The smell of fried beans hung in the air while *migrantes* sat in the shelter's courtyard eating dinner. The new arrivals, a group of deportees and a Haitian family of three, stood in line outside of the shelter. I began the intake process with the family. Two women and a two-year-old traveled from Haiti with long sojourns in Brazil and Chile before saving enough money to make their way north to the US-Mexico border. Tijuana was their last stop in their quest for asylum in the US. It was a cold night, and they were only wearing t-shirts. The mother of the two-year-old handed her child to her sister and walked with another volunteer to the *cuarto de ropa*[2] for sweaters. The intake process required potential shelter residents to disclose chronic illnesses. – *Do you have a chronic illness?* She hesitated and replied something in Creole I did not understand. I reformulated the question: *Do you suffer from a chronic illness?* She looked at me in eye – *Yes, sir*…, and pulling back her braided hair, uncovered her ears. Both of her helixes were unevenly jagged, as though they had been cut with scissors. The helix on her left ear was almost entirely gone. – … *I always [still] suffer.*[3] She and the rest of her family escaped an alcoholic husband, marital violence and rural poverty in Haiti.

A conversation about chronic illness led to one about chronic suffering. The following day,

1 Spanish for "migrant". At the shelter, "migrante" was the common denominator to refer to shelter residents.

2 *Cuarto the ropa*, literary "room of clothes", is the term shelter workers used to refer to the storage room where the shelter kept donations of second-hand shoes and clothes.

3 We carried out the conversation in French. I asked: *Est-ce que vous avez une maladie chronique?* / I rephased: *souffrez-vous d'une maladie chronique?* She responded: *Oui monsieur (pause) je souffre toujours.* In English it loses the nuance of how my rephasing the question led her to interpret it in terms of chronic suffering, and not chronic illness.

at the shelter's legal office, Jeanne, the woman with the mutilated ears, told her story. The lawyer transcribed the details of her life in Haiti, the hunger, and violence, and their travels through Latin America. The story, though recounted with temporal breaks and lapses in memory, gained linear chronicity on paper. The shelter's lawyers shaped, in other words, a fragmented narrative into a chronologically coherent story to render it legally legible. Yet Jeanne's and her family's narrative was not enough to secure their refugee status in the US. Corroborating evidence was essential in making her case stand a chance in court. Her scars provided a credible witness to back her story. Photos of her ears spoke to the violence inflicted on her. Fassin and D'Halluin (2005) suggest that refugees' bodies carry a double temporality: one inscribed by the exercise of power, another etched by truth – the truth that bears witness to the power inflicted on their bodies by the institutions of refugees' (or in this case, asylum-seekers') host countries. This double imprint, as Fassin and D'Halluin argue, faces two paradoxical situations: (a) one that arises from refined methods of torture that leave little physical evidence, and (b) the expectation of physical evidence from the state accompanied with the lack of confidence in asylum seekers' ability to demonstrate it. In this context, medical expertise takes on the authoritative role to prove it: "The medical certificate leads to a reification of the asylum seeker's body. Detached from the lived experience of the victims of persecution, it attempts their objectification through experts' words and ends up in *desubjectifying* them" (p.598, my emphasis).

Rather than tracing the "desubjectification" that medical certificates create for asylum seekers, the separation of their lives from their bodies, this paper teases out the return of people's lives to their bodies through the words they employ to narrate the photographs of their bodies in support to their asylum-seeking claims. Photographs, much like medicate certificates, reify, objectify, and fix the fear of torture or persecution asylum seekers must prove their bodies bear to gain refugee status. Can we think of a process of "*re*-subjectification"[4] as asylum-seekers tell their stories through their photographs rather than their photographs representing their fear, suffering and distress for them? Here, the implication is that photographs are part of a broader narrative about their lives, not the "credible witness" to them. And that, as I attempt to show, as they narrate their lives through their photographs, they allow for the return of their words to their bodies. This return, a return to their ordinary lives, unfolds through people's reclaiming their voices. What I have in mind when I suggest that people "reclaim their voices" sits close to the pedagogical practice at the heart of Wittgenstein's confessional mode of philosophizing and living (Monk, 1991, pp.366-367). Wittgenstein eschews a picture of self-knowledge as a form of self-revelation or disclosure of the "inner". For Wittgenstein, an autobiographical disclosure that is coherent and "whole" is akin to self-deception. Instead, the "subject in relation to itself must continually work on its self on the understanding that such work is worthwhile but is never completed and that, inescapably, as such subjects 'we' return to ourselves everyday" (Peters, 2000, p.357). This writing of self or the continuous return to the self is the process I trace in this article through the narratives asylum seekers tell around the photographs of their and other people's bodies. The photographs do not *speak* for them. Photographs, against the "desubjectifying"

4 Didier Fassin uses the idea of subjectification to foreground the process of subject formation: "the production of subjects and subjectivities that hold political significance within the framework of social interaction" (2008, p.533). Both in the case of Palestinians who suffer from PTSD (2008) and racialized immigrants and their children in Paris (2013) subjectification through interpellation allows people to learn what they represent, or "who they are in the gaze of others" (2013, p.7). This is not how I pursue the idea of *re-subjectification*. Although there is an important sense of becoming people engage in the process of asylum seeking (something close to what Foucault called in the second volume of the History of Sexuality "the arts of existence"), I want to propose instead that narrating their lives through photographs of their bodies or their loved ones allow people seeking asylum to, in Veena Das's words, "achieve the everyday" (Das, 2020, pp.168-169). The idea is simple: people who have suffered through violence, torture, horror, and loss must learn, once again, to inhabit their everyday lives. In living through extreme experiences of violence, there is a break between the world and the word. How do asylum seekers bridge that gap, if at all? The literature pays little attention to the day-to-day struggles of asylum seekers. This essay is an attempt to re-center the focus to approach how people navigate and negotiate fear and loss in the long waits between appointments with immigration officials and court dates, often stretching over for years.

impulses of asylum-seeking processes, in short, are a vehicle through which asylum seekers return to their selves and re-create their own narratives while reworking their past.

The migrant shelter where I conducted fieldwork for 15 months provided asylum seekers with the material and legal resources to navigate their asylum-seeking process in the US. Stuck in Tijuana, many asylum seekers eventually left the shelter. Their lives unfolded between waiting for the next court date, finding jobs, and learning to adapt to the difficulties of living in Tijuana. While working at the shelter, I witnessed their daily struggles to secure refugee status in the US. In this article, I employ the notion of witnessing in a double sense: in the connection between knowledge/evidence that asylum-seeking processes convey, and in witnessing as a dimension of people's ordinary lives. In the second sense, witnessing is an act through which people engage each other. What I mean by this aligns closely with what Al-Mohammad (2010) suggests as an ethics of being-*with*. An ethics of being-with pays attention to how living with others fosters "bonds of care and interest" (p.436). By emphasizing the -*with*, Al-Mohammad seeks to sidestep conceptualizations of ethics that revolve around the ethics of the self and instead foregrounds how our ethical lives and responsibilities are located outside of ourselves and enmeshed in the lives of others (p. 441). In a sense, the return to the ordinary is also a moral project. A project that involves people's return to the everyday by revising and rewriting the self while interacting with others as they face up to "the difficulty of reality" (Diamond, 2003, p.2).

In processes of asylum seeking, there is a disconnect between these two dimensions of witnessing (one institutional, embedded in bureaucratic-legal processes; the other, as a dimension of people's everyday lives). Asylum applicants' credibility, or being judged credible by judges and immigration officials, hinges on "subjective" and "objective" criteria (Kim, 2021). The subjective component refers to the (subjective) fear asylum seekers feel of past and future persecution, while the objective component points at the *objective situation* the asylum seeker demonstrates to substantiate their mental state (their fear) (p. 193). Asylum seekers, in other words, should prove their fear by proxy. Kim suggests that that courts struggle to apply the objective component of the well-founded fear test, conflating the burden of proof of persecution in terms of probability of future persecution with the criteria people must fulfill to attain refugee status. Be that as it may, the fact remains that immigration officials must believe asylum seekers narratives of persecution. This raises the question of what makes a story credible. Connie Oxford (2023) suggests that detailed statements, testimony, and asylum seekers' demeanor play a pivotal role in achieving credibility – often at the expense of retraumatizing asylum seekers in the process of disclosing the "gory details" (p.206). Here, I engage with the gory details not behind the closed doors of the asylum hearings or immigration courts, but at the shelter and in people's homes. In these cases, asylum seekers tell their stories not with the intent of meeting the standard of credibility to achieve refugee status, but to make sense of them. Their bodies, if sometimes in their absence, are a metonymy for the fear, anguish, and terror they experienced.

1. The body as witness or witnessing through the body?

Two lawyers headed the legal office at the shelter, each one in charge of different immigration and asylum-seeking processes in Mexico and the United States. The UN Refugee Agency financed the hiring of a second lawyer to support the asylum claims before COMAR.[5] Many Central Americans under the MPP (Migrant Protection Protocols) who had grown tired of attending asylum hearings (*cortes*) across the border, opted for requesting asylum in Mexico. In late 2018 when the migrant caravans continued to trek to cities in northern Mexico, the Lopez

5 Mexico's Commission for Refugee Assistance (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados).

Obrador government handed out one-year humanitarian visas that provided with legal standing to those waiting at Mexican border cities for their interview with an asylum officer or, if the asylum officer found that the person had a credible fear of persecution or torture, their asylum hearing before an immigration judge. Mexico's good political will cloaked the risks inherent in the Migrant *Protection* Protocols in making asylum claimants wait in Mexico. Such risks are well documented (Doctors Without Borders, 2020) and surfaced in most initial interviews with the shelter's lawyers. Many migrants who did not have "strong cases" – cases where they could prove credible fear – by virtue of having been victims of a crime in Mexico and reporting it, they became eligible for a one-year humanitarian visa. Many so-called "economic migrants" used this legal recourse to remain in Mexico.

Trying to reduce the odds of being deported, either from Mexico or the United States, many Central Americans who arrived at the shelter often engaged in parallel asylum-seeking processes, requesting asylum in Mexico and the US simultaneously. The long waiting times between asylum hearings in the US and their precarious outcomes were an important factor in this calculated decision. They made this choice with the lawyers' warning that if either of the countries became aware of an open process of requesting asylum elsewhere, they risked losing their potential refugee status. The legal process for attaining asylum differs in Mexico and the US. But they overlap in the definition of what an asylum seeker is, of the criteria a person must meet to attain the status of refugee: to have fled their home country in fear of persecution or torture (UNHCR, 2010). Asylum-seekers provide evidence during the qualifying process to substantiate their fear. How this evidence is documented, framed, and narrated marks the difference between what makes it credible or not. The documentation of the fear of persecution or torture was one of the key tasks of the shelter's legal office. Notarized witness accounts, photographs of their homes ransacked, videos of confrontations with gang members and threats to their lives accompanied people's stories. A powerful witness in this body of evidence was the claimant's body itself. Scars, scar tissue, broken bones, and mutilated limbs and cartilage were credible witnesses.

Guadalupe

Guadalupe was a short but stocky man. He arrived from work early that evening. The lawyer waited for us outside her office. She explained to Guadalupe that I would be the one taking the photos to complete his application dossier. He and I entered the office, I shut the blinds and asked him to show me his scars. The camera was sitting on a desk next to the window. Guadalupe dropped his denim backpack on the floor, and removed his white, sweat-stained baseball cap. – *Look, here's the biggest one, but you'll have to get closer because [it is on my scalp] and my hair covers it.* He parted his hair with the palms of his hands, uncovering a long line that ran across his mid-scalp to the crown of his head. The office's dim light made it difficult to focus the lens. He sat down and bent forward all the while with his hands on this scalp. – *Are you able to get it now? – Yes, I got it. – You see, the night of my father's wake, a car repair shop in my town was robbed.* He stood up from the chair and began unbuttoning his shirt, revealing a white tank top. He folded the shirt and lay it on a desk next to him. – *When I got home, a few men were waiting for me, blaming me for breaking in and stealing forty thousand Quetzales and a handgun.* He removed his tank top and pointed to a protruding scar visible in its discolored pigmentation. – *Here, look, they got me here with a butcher's knife. It bled a lot; I first thought it had gone through my ribcage.* I approached him as he lifted his right arm above his head, feeling his scar with his left hand. I focused the lens and snapped the shutter, *click, click, click* – he paused talking while the camera's shutter went off. – *So I called the police, what else was I supposed to do? When they*

arrived, they told me that they couldn't do anything for me. They'd caught wind that a local gang had already been hired to "handle me" if I didn't pay what I'd stolen. The police told me that I better paid them; they weren't going to get involved.

Guadalupe turned around, with his back towards me, lifting his right arm over his head with his elbow to the ceiling, attempting to feel a few scars on his upper back. – *I think I put on weight; I can't reach them anymore ha-ha. – I see them, don't worry. Click, click, click, click.* Unsure about the number of photos that he would need, I took multiple photos in different angles of each scar. *– I tried to talk to the gang leader, and he tells me someone snitched I had taken money from the car repair shop, and they expected me to repay in the next days.* He turned around, unbuckled his belt, pulled his pants down and pointed at two sunk bolt-shaped scars on his left thigh. He raised his head searching my eyes – *Ice pick, can you tell? –Sure seems like it. Click, click. – Wait, I have more on my calf, see? It went right through. A week later, three men were waiting for me outside my house and attacked me. The only reason I made it alive is because I managed to get in my car and drove away. Oh yes, I almost forgot my hands.* With his pants down, staggering, he sat on a chair and extended his arms displaying the palms of his hands. – *See them?* Crooked deep cuts ran from his palms to his forearms. He traced them with his index fingers and winced as though reliving the pain. – *I drove myself to the hospital and that same day, I left. And now I'm here.* I photographed a few smaller scars on his arms and neck before he got dressed. – *Now what? My court date is in a week.* In fact, what he had the following week was his credible fear interview with an US immigration officer. And only if the immigration officer determined that he had a "significant possibility" of fear of persecution or torture, would he be relayed to an immigration judge to continue with his application process. – *Now I'll pass on these photos to the lawyer, and she'll explain to you what to do next.*

Someone called out his name from the central patio. He had *aseo*.[6] He grabbed his backpack and left. A few days later, the lawyer asked me for help translating his nephew's notarized witness account (affidavit) of the events that unfolded the day the car repair shop was robbed. His story, the photos of his scars, and his nephew's affidavit were the core of his case to argue that he had credible fear of persecution. But the day of his interview he was sent back to Tijuana with a deportation order in hand. The asylum officer did not find grounds for believing he had a credible fear of persecution or torture. Legally, he had the right to request that the asylum officer's decision be reviewed by an immigration judge. But he did not know he had that right, nor did the asylum officer mentioned it before issuing the deportation order. That day, Guadalupe was judged and sentenced "not only in innocence but also in ignorance" (Benjamin, 2019, p. 60). When I asked about his case to the shelter's lawyer, she nodded with a wry smile when I told her about his deportation order. – *It is part of how asylum system works. I've had people who arrived at their credible fear interview, and they say, up front, that they just want to go to the United State to work – they are not at risk, and they do get a court date. Sometimes people who have good chances of winning their cases are rejected at the beginning of their process, and those who do not stand a chance move on to see immigration judges. What for? Well, just to get rejected—officially.*

Guadalupe refused to request asylum in Mexico. He thought the gang commissioned to "deal with him" had members in Tijuana. Not long after he and other two *migrantes* struck a deal with a *coyote*[7] to cross into the US. He left one evening without saying anything. Two weeks later, he arrived at the shelter. The *coyote* got lost in *el hongo*, the dry hills that cut across the city of Tecate and the US-Mexico border. They wandered off for four days before the border patrol

6 In shelter jargon, *aseo* (to tidy up) is the term shelter workers used to refer to the daily cleaning tasks shelter residents performed as part of their stay at the shelter.

7 Term used to refer to people smugglers that operate across the US-Mexico border.

picked them up. He was in bad shape. He had blisters across his face, his arms and neck. He had holes on his shoe soles and limped from the pain caused by the rubbing of the blisters on the soles of his feet against the ground. While in migratory detention, he received no medical treatment nor a change of clothes. He reeked of smoke and sweat, of dirt. We made our way to the second floor to get him a change of clothes. He faltered up the stairs supporting his weight against the handrail. I held open a black garbage bag while he undressed and put his "desert clothes" in it and peeled off what was left of his shoes. A layer of musty dust colored his exposed skin only becoming visible in contrast to the rest of his bare body. – *What happened to you? –We got lost in [Tecate's] hills. The coyote did not know where to go to anymore!* He showered, bandaged the wounds on his feet, and limped his way out of the shelter – *I need to try [to cross] again. This time I will try through the ocean; I won't set foot in those hills again.* He gave me his denim backpack with his asylum dossier, including the photos I took of him, for safekeeping.

2. Bridging the body/mind split: responsiveness towards others

Photography's role in enabling to keep accurate records of people stretches back to the early nineteenth century. John Tagg (1988), for instance, argues that the development of photography coincides with the institution of the police in England. Photographs provided a cheap means to keep criminal records and evidence. This "faithful" record of reality spread to other institutions such as schools, the army, and mental asylums. To explain the proliferation of photographs from the realm of art to the halls of police stations and beyond, Walter Benjamin (2019) suggests that photography had to lose its "aura" for its exhibition value began to replace its cult value. That is, the mechanical reproduction of the photograph stripped away its cult-value and, arguably, obscured the performative process behind its framing (Shusterman, 2012). What I want to foreground here is how photography's end-product (the photograph) and the fixed and objectified presentation of the self it renders visible and infinitely reproduceable contrasts with Guadalupe's somatic awareness of this body as he tells his story. Through feeling his warped skin in narrating the violence that led him to the shelter, he engages in an ongoing project of self-fashioning and self-understanding. His self-exposure before the camera, in other words, allowed him find out who he was (Shusterman, 2012, p.70).

Incomplete and partial as this process was, it paradoxically made his body into an object. Under the banner of "asylum seeker", the photographs gave Guadalupe's rendering of the self permanence: "this mutilated body is the body of an asylum seeker". As Benjamin argues, in the transition from art to means of establishing evidence, photographs could no longer be objects of free-floating contemplation. Captions began accompanying photographs as "signposts" (p.177). Photographs, in other words, needed framing for people to interpret them. The standardized images produced by police photographers were "more than a picture of a supposed criminal. [They were] the portrait of the product of a disciplinary method: the body made object; divided and studied (…) made docile and forced to yield up its truth" (Tagg, 1998, p.76). The photographs I took of Guadalupe's scars that day had the aim of extracting the truth. It is in this Foucauldian sense that the evidence or knowledge that the photography captured presented a "perfect and faithful record" (Tagg, 1998, p.78) of his present and future fear.

Through the objectified images of his body, we could "know" Guadalupe's inner self – as if from a distance. In this context, an important question arises: what is to know another mind? This is a question Stanley Cavell (1979) engages in his discussion of the skepticism of other minds. Cavell grapples with the possibility of knowing (having the certainty of) what another person is thinking and feeling. The skeptic would argue that since we cannot know what another

person is feeling, say pain or fear, we cannot know them. They are opaque to us. This conclusion, people's impenetrability, relies on the dualism between body (outside) and mind (inside). For the skeptic, knowing another person would require bridging the gap between expression or behavior and the mind. But Cavell rebukes this conclusion. In following Wittgenstein's admonition that "the human body is the best picture of the human mind" (PI, Part II § IV), Cavell suggests that we can and often do know other people. The body is the only thing we have to go on in understanding a human being. Think of pain. When Guadalupe displayed his scars to me and traced the line of the knife's path on his skin and winced, as though relieving the pain, I *knew* his pain. I knew it not because I could feel it, or because the scars on his forearms "evidenced" his pain, but because his pain was its expression. As Cavell puts it:

> "My references to my pain are exactly my expressions of pain itself; and my words refer to my pain just because, or to the extent, that they are (modified) expressions of it (…) [T] he picture of a connection needing to be set up between an experience and the words for it is symbolic of the giving of expression to the experience, *giving vent to it*." (Cavell, 1979, p.342, my emphasis)

Are Guadalupe's scars the picture of his pain? Hardly so. They are flesh bearing marks. But "knowing" his pain depends on something more intricate than displaying an "objective" picture of the gory bits at the heart of his asylum claim. Knowing the other, in our separateness, entails acknowledgement. Cavell argues that acknowledgement "goes beyond knowledge" (p.428) in the sense that it is not only knowledge of the other that is at stake –their fear, happiness, or horror – but our *response* to this knowledge. Expressions and behavior, in other words, place a claim on us (Moi, 2017, p.207). His claim on me was to witness his self-revelation, displayed in revealing his body to show me his fear. In the move from knowledge to acknowledgement, Cavell raises an ethical question: who am I in relation to you? That day, I witnessed Guadalupe's fear. In paying attention to his words that escaped the narrow frame of the camera, and documenting his scars, I was-*with* him.

The probable fear test casts doubt over this ethical dimension. Like Cavell's skeptic, the probable fear tests assumes that we cannot know with certainty the inner lives of others. Asylum seekers might lie or fake it. This is why standard of credibility rely on "objective" elements, like photographs or forensic psychological reports, and on narratives of persecution where people show their (possible and future) fear. But even then, and especially difficult when testimonies involve traumatic memories, credibility relies on standard of consistency, the provision of details, and "believable" displays of emotions that are hard to meet (Oxford, 2023). What counts as proof, the "objective" and "subjective" criteria – something outer that should prove the reliability of the inner – reinforces the Cartesian dualism between body and mind. For a body/mind to be legible to the legal-bureaucratic processes of asylum seeking it must fit a particular idea of what an asylum seeker is, looks like, and behaves (and *feels* too). There is wrapped in the asylum-seeking process, in other words, an aesthetic dimension.

At the shelter's legal office, the two lawyers prepared asylum seekers to meet the expectations US immigration officers would have of what an asylum seeker was and was not. People requesting asylum had to correspond to that idea. Their acknowledgement depended on a process of aesthetic self-creation, "to give [their] own li[ves] a certain form in which [they] could recognize [themselves], [and] be recognized by others" (Foucault, 1988, p.49). But, as in Guadalupe's case,

sometimes it was not enough. Yet what is clear is that the body poses a challenge to the law in general and asylum law in particular. How are bodies translated into law?

3. Bodies at the threshold of the law

Irma

Stray dogs panting in the shade barked when I rang the bell. Irma opened a dark, iron-barred door and let her head out to see who was standing at the gate. – *just a second!* We walked through a courtyard with children's toys scattered in the dirt. A queen-size mattress leaned against the wall under the midday sun next to the steps that led up to her door. – *Poor children, I need to get them another mattress. The bedbugs eat them alive every night. But what can you do? The house was infested when we moved in.* We sat in the kitchen of a one-bedroom apartment. Her 5-year-old daughter and 13-year-old son shared the living room, while she and her boyfriend slept in a little room next to the bathroom. She opened a taupe paper folder with newspaper cuttings and a few photographs. She spread them on the kitchen table. A young boy, aged 14 at the time, appeared in all of them.

He was big! 6'2 when he turned 14! I still remember what he was wearing the day he asked permission to go to the corner store. I knew he shouldn't go; I told him he shouldn't go. But I had to go to work, his siblings to school, and there was nothing for him to do at home. Irma stood up and went into the kitchen for a glass of water. He liked going to the corner store because there was an Arcade. That's how the gang located him. I forbade him to return to the corner store after the gang approached him to recruit him. They told him "you join or you die". But it was the middle of the day, and a couple of months had passed since their attempt at recruiting him. So he went and never came back home. They shot him in the back of the head.

Irma started reading out load one of the press clippings on the table: "Another gang-related killing…". The clipping shrunk under the weight of tears dripping from her chin. Irma lost herself in grief after her son's murder. Her other two children went to live with her mother. For three months, she remained locked in her house. She slowly recovered and returned to work. One day, as she walked to the bus stop, a car rolled up on her. A man with his face covered in tattoos came out of the passenger's sit, handgun tucked between his belt and jeans, and opened the back door –*get in, what are you waiting for?* She hesitated. – *I'm not asking again.* Irma got in the car. A man dressed in a suit shook her hand and apologized for accosting her. He explained that he had been keeping tabs on her for a while, and he wanted her to "be with him". – *He was nothing like the two other people in the car. He smelled nice, was sharply dressed, and was extremely polite.* She refused, and nervously quipped that she was late for work. – *no need to worry, we'll drive you.* They knew where she worked.

This was only the first approach. Irma began seeing the car parked outside of her house at night. The third time the car rolled up on her she received a deadline: she had a week to decide. – *He made sure I understood that refusing meant not being able to choose anymore; for me and my children.* That night, Irma and her children left Honduras. They took a bus to the Honduras-Guatemala border, and then a series of local buses to the Guatemala-Mexico border. – *We didn't sleep for days. After we crossed the Suchiate River, I thought we would be safe or feel safe, at least.* Their reception into Mexico broke her expectations. Mexican immigration officers sent her and her children to Siglo XXI, an immigration detention center in Tapachula, to wait out their process. The three of them shared a bunkbed, without sheets or pillows. The wait was long and the food scarce. They waited for four months to meet with a COMAR officer. Her desperation grew as her youngest child fell sick, and she could not leave the detention

center to buy antibiotics – *she was going down the toilet!* They escaped during a mutiny at the detention center and paid for a ride out of Tapachula in a private car to avoid being stopped at the immigration checkpoints outside the city.

In Tijuana, Irma began a romantic relationship with a Mexican deportee. He worked remotely for a call center while Irma cleaned hotel rooms in *Zona Rio* – the city's business center. After three court dates, *del otro lado*[8] and two years in waiting, Irma had lost hope of attaining asylum in the US. She was unable to produce the body of her dead child despite the press clippings, narratives of grief, disbelief and horror, and the coroner's report in her dossier. The missing body of her murdered child did not immediately fulfill the objective and subjective criteria to prove credible well-founded fear of persecution or torture. Her narrative, manufactured at the shelter's legal office, sought to produce the body. And through it, by proxy, embody and display the fear of a similar future awaiting her two other children. Matthew Unger (2022) argues that the law requires translation of the mundane world to render it legible. The writ of *habeas corpus*, for instance, incorporates the body into the law by providing it with legal personhood– from the flesh into and under the protection of the law. But the *habeas corpus*, akin to the legal protections Roman law prescribed to bodies in tombs, acts as a fulcrum that protects the "shell" around which the body is enveloped. *Habeas corpus*, in other words, protects the sacred space of the law, not the body. For Unger, "this signifies (…) something of the way that the body functions through the history of the law – that law acts as a sacred shroud around which the body becomes legible, whether the body is intact, present, or able to speak" (p. 81). Irma's son was not able to speak. Yet Irma summoned the immateriality of his body to request asylum. Irma's son's absent body and her fear stood in waiting at the threshold of the law.

4. Between spaces

In Kafka's *The Trial* (2009), the parable "before the law" foregrounds the liminal space the body occupies in the law. Kafka tells the story of a man from the country who seeks the law but is unable to access it. The man waits at its gates until he finally dies. But in his final moments, he asks the doorkeeper: "[e]veryone seeks the Law (…) so how is it that in all these years no one apart from me has asked to be let in" and the doorkeepers replies "[n]o one else could be granted entry here, because this entrance was intended for you alone. I shall now go and shut it" (p.155). The asylum seekers I have portrayed in this article, like the man from the country, stood outside of the law. What we face in Kafka's parable is the elusiveness of the law in applying to all but without being within reach. This is why Unger calls it an "absent presence". We are all subjects to it but cannot access it.

I have responded to the *no place* (Beardsworth, 1996, p.29) that is the law with the narratives of asylum seekers that, standing at its gates, narrate it. These narratives unsettle its desubjectifying and universal force. For, as Derrida (2018) suggests, the law operates in such a way that it should not have a history, genesis, or derivation to maintain its authority (p.35). Asylum seekers emplace the law by engaging with it through their embodied narratives. Their narratives, as I have argued, are also part of asylum seekers' return to the self. In returning to the self, they rework their experiences while making sense of them. This is a moral project. Asylum seekers share their stories with others, making a claim on them to listen, and pay attention to their ongoing struggle to sensing their lives.

The asylum system in the US and beyond, however, leans towards privileging asylum seekers' bodies at the expense of their voices. The discredit of asylum, as Fassin (2011) suggests, hinges

8 *Del otro lado* (on the other side) is a colloquial term to refer to the US side of the US-Mexico border.

on the redefinition of a refugee from someone who fears for their life to someone who bears the scars of violence. As this tendency becomes widespread, it disadvantages asylum seekers whose persecution has left no scars or lack access to medical or psychological resources to document them (p.288). In this redefinition of what constitutes an asylum seeker, centered around the body, a different idea of who is worthy of protection is at play. This change speaks to the reconfiguration between fact/knowledge, the body and ethics at the center of the idea of asylum seeking. To how "all our ethical concepts and norms (and even the very notion of humanity that underwrites them) depend on social forms of life involving the way we experience our bodies and the way others treat [respond to] them" (Shusterman, 2006, p.5). To bridge the separation between their lives and their bodies, asylum seekers narrate their stories between spaces – in an obscure office in the back of the shelter, at people's home's kitchen's tables – that often escapes what is ethnographically visible (Farmer, 2004) – not only because it is not always in front of us, but because of a lack of attention to others.

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Thinking Through the Body in 'Action Anthropology'

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Abstract: *I write this paper in a spirit of exploration inspired by Richard Shusterman's work on somaesthetics to give language to what I have always known or, more precisely, felt yet struggled to adequately express about my practice as an 'action anthropologist'. Bringing somaesthetic theory and philosophy to bear on Sol Tax's proposal for action-oriented praxis in anthropology, I suggest that Tax's description of action – as "a program of probing, listening, learning, giving in" – shows how the possibility of change in action research arises from, and returns us to, the somatic conditions of people's self-empowerment and social agency.*

Keywords: *action anthropology, Sol Tax, participatory research, embodied change, somaesthetics of action, somapower*

1. Claiming one's condition

What I refer to as "action" in this article is the intention on the part of anthropologists to put the project of research in the service of "ordinary people" (Baba 2009, Price 2019). While today's discipline accommodates a spectrum of applied or collaborative approaches, the difference that an "action" or "participatory action" approach is said to make derives from the focus on providing human participants with the opportunity to use the tools of research to transform their reality on their own terms. How far back the turn to this participatory model of action goes in anthropology is still debated, but it was the Chicago anthropologist Sol Tax who first coined the term "action anthropologist" in 1959. For Tax, "action anthropology" referred to:

> an activity in which an anthropologist has two coordinate goals, to neither one of which he will delegate an inferior position. He wants to help a group of people to solve a problem, *and* he wants to learn something in the process. He refuses ever to think or to say that the people involved are for him a means of advancing his knowledge; and he refuses to think or to say that he is simply applying science to the solution of those people's problems. (original italics; 1975[1959], p. 515).

Reflecting on a ten-year project with Meskwaki peoples in Iowa, Tax described the 'action anthropologist' as an "experimentalist" who was "willing to make things happen, or to help them along, or at least to be catalysts" (1975, p. 515). For Tax, fieldwork was an ethical endeavor. "People are not rats and ought not be treated like them," Tax would write; "[c]ommunity research is thus justifiable only to the degree that the results are imminently useful to the community and easily outweigh the disturbance to it" (Tax 1959 quoted in Tax, 1975, p. 515).

Although disciplinary interest in Tax's specific proposal for an 'action anthropology' waned come the 1960s (Bennett 1996), his work lingered in the background serving, at different times, as a point of reference or as a counterpoint for a new grouping anthropologists around the world who were setting out to recast inquiry, and the idea of ethnographic fieldwork, as a radically political and liberatory tool.[1] Working in, and closely *with*, peasant and Indigenous communities connected in various ways to the swathe of anti-colonial and land reform movements during the mid-twentieth century, anthropologists like Orlando Fals-Borda (in Columbia) and Marja-Liisa Swantz (in Tanzania) were contributing to a paradigmatic shift borne from a clear rejection of the "false objectivism of positivist social science" (Swantz, 2008, p. 32). People were no longer the "objects" of inquiry but "human persons" and historical protagonists of their own lives (Reason & Torbert 2001). Fieldworkers now needed to justify their presence in communities and demonstrate how, given the conditions of poverty and structural inequality that people suffered under, any proposed project could help individuals move along by changing how they could see *their* world and thus transform it.

The vision of this new kind of research practice was participatory and action-oriented; it was transformational not foundational. By situating the poor, oppressed or marginalized at the center of projects, the purpose of research was to become an "agent of transformation" (Swantz, 2008, p. 33). For the Colombian sociologist/anthropologist, Orlando Fals-Borda (1991, p. 9), for example, the purpose was to "remake knowledge" so that people could eventually overcome their "limiting situations" (Freire 1969) and "progressively transform their environment by their own praxis" (Rahman, 1991, p. 13). Importantly, as the Bangladeshi intellectual Mohammad Anisur Rahman would write, the possibility for liberation through participatory action research relies on empowering people to "build their self-knowledge" and enhance their "self-awareness" (1991, pp. 15-18).

Rahman's words are telling. From the outset, Fals-Borda and others understood that radical social change was predicated on people's capacity for autonomous self-reflection. Autonomy was the key. By supporting marginalized communities to criticize and problematize their "problem situation" (Tax 1975), community facilitators assumed that people would come to see and find ways to realize a different future. Transformation then was about people "claiming their condition" (Glassman & Erdem, 2014, p. 213), an insight that, I suggest, turned action into a meliorative project driven by a desire to encourage people to trust in their experience but without being dictated by it.[2]

It was for similar reasons to these that in the 1990s two influential British scholars, John Heron and Peter Reason (e.g. 1997; also see, Heron, 1996), were inspired to bring the field of "action research" into conversation with the writings on personalism by the early-twentieth Scottish philosopher and public intellectual John Macmurray. For Macmurray (1970), the human capacity for intentional action makes clear the possibilities and conditions that the

1 The "participatory action" approach that Orlando Fals-Borda and Marja-Liisa Swantz became principal proponents of is but one approach that exists alongside but also, at times, in tension with a host of engaged, applied, activist-oriented and/or community-based approaches in anthropology. For a history of the interplay between so-called "pure" and "applied" approaches in the discipline, see Baba, 2009; Chambers, 1987; Lamphere, 2004.

2 Recognizing PAR as driven by a commitment to realizing people's 'autonomous self-reflection' is, I find, not so much poorly understood as overlooked. Fals-Borda (1991, p. 4), for example, conceived of his participatory action approach in response to his reading of the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset's existentialist position on Man as "the novelist of himself," a Being, that is, who can transform their circumstances based on the understanding that they are neither natural nor fixed but a historical and therefore changeable set of conditions of one's existence. One finds connections here – indirect perhaps but nevertheless significant – to Paulo Freire's Marxist inspired notion of conscientization (of bringing people into awareness of the histories of their own oppressive situations so as to change them) and back to Tax's (1956) more liberal idea of freedom as action derived from people's right to self-determination, i.e. in the freedom of people to make mistakes. More work, I find, needs to complicate the idea of autonomy in PAR and assess the utility of other understandings such as "relational autonomy" (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000), this could also extend to looking at how PAR overlaps with Emerson's ideas of moral perfectionism and those of personal renewal as found in the work of John Dewey and Stanley Cavell (see Granger, 2001; also see, Pedwell, 2021; Woodland, 2021).

world imposes on us. Yet, at the same time, our capacity for action also demonstrates that far from fixed, the world is contingent, particular and changeable. In light of such unpredictability, Macmurray argued, we have to be able to trust ourselves and other people with whom we are always in relation (Godway, 2010, p.5). As Eleanor Godway eloquently puts it in her writings on Macmurray: "[w]hat we do affects the future, indeed, inaugurates *this* future instead of any alternative, and this will be a future we all have to share" (original italics; Godway, 2010, p. 5).

Macmurray's metaphysics strongly resonate with the action turn. He makes it clear that agents are only such by virtue of being one among (many) Others. It is in our *encounter* with Others that we realize we are, irreducibly, "persons in relation" (Macmurray 1961). Macmurray's "Self" then is, as he writes, "constituted by its relation to the Other; that it has its being in relationship; and that this relationship is necessarily personal" (1970, p. 17). Macmurray would go on to name the primary condition of such relations, *friendship*. "All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship" (1970, p. 15). With this, human flourishing is necessarily attained by intending the flourishing of Others. In the same vein, the action turn rejects any attempt to tell people 'how life should be'; rather, its force is to show people differences, posing the question of the kind 'how might things look and *feel* for you and others *if* you were to explore previously unnoticed openings to change aspects of how you go on in everyday life?'

Embodied Encounters

My point is that if action is the means of "claiming one's condition" then, in contrast to Paulo Frerie's position on the matter (1970), action is not an epistemological project. Instead, its work rests on bringing people into "an embodied sense of empowerment and agency which is *then* directed towards active self-and-world making" (my italics; Woodland, 2021, p. 5; also see Shusterman, 2014, p. 8). Speaking somaesthetically, the project of participatory action research aims for "improved experience" over "originary truth," flourishing and personal renewal over fixity and stasis; it is, then, a project of self-cultivation: "experience, growth … communication, consciousness-raising, ethical social action and transformation" (in Woodland, 2021, p. 5). Its modus operandi is to *orient* people to get out from under the schemes imposed on them by external regimes of power, by helping them see the world differently (Shotter, 2003, p. 296). Feeling empowered, feeling that faced with a specific problem or issue there is something to be done, people can choose to take their own decisions over what to do next. Ultimately, if the aim of the action turn is about allowing people to gain control of their own experience then its project is bodily; it is the encounter between people (and the world) that animates the anthropological project of action, an encounter that we can gain a better sense for by not thinking around or past the body but, rather, *through* it (Granger, 2010, p. 120, Shusterman 2012; also see Jackson, 1989).

2. Disembodied activism?

Given this internal connection between embodied agents and action and research, I have struggled with why it is that anthropological accounts of action are so somatically impoverished? If everything, as Wittgenstein (1959) reminds us, is right in front of our eyes, is bad eyesight an anthropological affliction? Obviously, the body is missing in these accounts (including my own – e.g., Watson, 2019, 2022), but why? Why are descriptions of the efforts of people to change their circumstances so …. disembodied?

For myself, a first, tentative step towards an answer has to do with the anthropological concept of 'voice.' Voice is now synonymous with the project of action: e.g. photovoice, storywork,

community voice method etc. Most projects aim "to give people a voice." This is considered a way of amplifying their concerns. However, the upshot of this move is that, consciously or otherwise, structural inequality is more often than not recast as a problem of self-expression (Couldry 2010). This is a key point I want to highlight because today one finds researchers investing significant political and symbolic capital in providing people with the space or opportunity to 'speak up' or to 'speak their truth.' This act is supposedly liberatory. It derives from an understanding that any individual or social group's direct experience of a particular lifeworld carries a privileged (epistemic) authority and (phenomenological) insight into that situation.

For action anthropologists, the power of voicing cannot be understated especially for the ways in which it helps practitioners draw on and mobilize other key concepts. For example, a principal method to help people 'find one's voice' is dialoguing *with* Others – a method that reaches back to Paulo Freire's proposal of critical pedagogy. For Freire, dialogue is an "existential necessity" for liberation (2017 [1970], p. 69). Dialogue is not "monologue, slogans, and communiqués" (2017 [1970], p. 47) but "the encounter between [persons], mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (2017 [1970], p. 69). In this picture of inquiry, newness is equated with the spontaneously creative and social force of collaboration through language. As Joseph Dunne succinctly puts it: "when viewpoints are brought together in conversation then, like the rubbing together of fire sticks (to use Plato's image), they can sometimes produce the illuminative spark that no one of them can quite produce on its own" (1993, p. 21).

Conversation or dialogue is the basic framework of participation in which anthropologists most often place their trust when seeking to make people's voices matter. The anthropologist Davydd Greenwood and co-author Morten Levin, for example, draw on Richard Rorty to resdescribe action research as an "ongoing conversation" that can bring people to "a state of communicative clarity" (2006, p. 71). As they write:

> [Action research] is, first and foremost, a way of "keeping the conversation going." [Its] methods aim to open horizons of discussion, to create spaces for collective reflection in which new descriptions and analyses of important situations may be developed as the basis for new actions. This is what we mean by *cogenerative learning.* (original italics; 2006, p. 72)

Although evocative of the spirit of action anthropology and in spite of appeals to "solidarity," I think it still unclear how Rorty's philosophy connects with the project of action research, especially given the fact Rorty had little to actually say about the nature of such agreement informing change. Furthermore, as Peter Reason has written, it is not clear how encouraging people to voice "imaginative stories of new possibilities" clarifies the claims of action research to connect an individual's sense of their autonomy with social or collective action (1999, p. 111).

Moreover, the spectre of Habermas and communicative action suffuses most contemporary claims to dialogical models of action research. I am not minded to thresh out the implications of this here except to point out that while actionists have clamored over what Habermas read into Wittgenstein, that language is a transformative and hopeful activity of rational communicative exchange (e.g. Carr & Kemmis 1983), they have conveniently ignored what Habermas read out of Wittgenstein: the irreducible complexities of everyday life challenged by the standing possibility of irreconcilable difference with an Other (Rienstra & Hook, 2007, p. 335, Hammer 2002, also see Cavell 1979).

This is important. I have argued elsewhere that any action project necessarily returns us to the "rough ground" of everyday life and to the vagaries of learning that happen within and between bodies and which give words life (Watson 2022). Shusterman anticipates this. His somaesthetics

implores us to not only dwell in but think through the "body's silent role as creative ground and intensifying background" (2002, p. 102). Shusterman, I feel, sees anthropology's blindspot and points to a different path to move along by means of a simple summons: why separate our actions from our bodies? Why, indeed, "separate words and voice from the body from which they issue and in which they resonate" (Shusterman 1997, p. 219n.21)?

3. The Somaesthetics of Action

To assuage the suspicions of anthropologists, the somaesthetic project does not set itself apart from, or situate itself above, the world. Admittedly, many of its points of reference may circulate in the rarefied air of (capital 'p') Philosophy, but in my reading, its heart and spirit, its attitude if you will, exemplified by Shusterman's work on rap music or in his performative Man of Gold series, is constitutive of its descent into the body's "crucial and complex role in aesthetic experience" (1999, p. 299). Critical commentary on the broader field of Action Research and its participatory method has long highlighted its rejection of Fordist models of academic production in birthing a new, person-centered and consensual ethical practice; but not enough attention has been given over to how the work of action is driven by aesthetic concerns, even functioning one might say according to an aesthetic logic (Koster, 2023, p. 25, 151).

Coming out of writings on the intersection of participation and "activist art" (Bishop 2006, Kester 2013), Claire Bishop identifies "an aesthetic of participation" as deriving legitimacy "from a (desired) causal relationship between the experience of a work of art and individual/collective agency" (2006, p. 12). For Bishop, a sense for the aesthetics of action surfaces when thinking of action as animated by its original desire, reiterated in every instance of its performance, to "create an active subject" – a new empowered citizen "who will find themselves able to determine their own social and political reality" (Bishop 2006, p. 12).

It is, however, the supposed causality between participation and the achievement of individual/collective agency that misleads. With Gilbert Ryle (2000 [1949]), I prefer to think of it as a kind of "category mistake." What I mean by this is that researchers, caught up in the language game of action research, are inclined to use the verb 'participate' as an "achievement verb" or what Ryle called "verbs of success" (Ryle, 2000 [1949], p. 125). These verbs, Ryle observed, "signify not merely that some experience has been gone through, but also that something has been brought off by the agent going through it" (Ryle, 2000 [1949], p. 125). So, in this instance, it appears common sense to assume that participation leads to agency.

But to pay attention to what it is people *actually* do and undergo in the midst of making something happen is to assume that people take responsibility for their performances. For this to happen, "people must be ready to fit their efforts to obtain their goals into the "requirements" of their surroundings, to move this way and that in accordance with the changed circumstances they themselves produce as a result of each step they take" (Shotter, 2012, p. 138). The focus is no longer on achievements but on one's *tryings*; in this way, participating is a "task verb" or a trying to do things (Ryle 2000 [1949]).

Aesthetics of Action

The aesthetics of action is not so much about a structurally coherent feeling for the union of the alienated individual and the socially nurturing collective. Instead, action's aesthetic appeal is very much about the perceived *effort* to augment an individual's capabilities (Shusterman 2014). On this, "what matters is not the act itself but act*ing* …. the result of an action is less important than the feeling it generates" (my italics; Koster, 2023, p. 148). This is to say that there is something

compelling about the perplexity and uncertainty of human flourishing and personal renewal that "includes habits of action and styles of … conduct which imply behavior that embodies admirable virtues" (Shusterman, 2014, p. 15). People usually admire the efforts of Other people to come into 'self-knowledge' or greater 'self-awareness.' Regardless if the overarching project is shown to have worked or not, *trying* to change is what matters (Watson 2022).

In an impact savvy modern profession, it is perhaps easy enough for researchers to connect people's reported "feelings" to demonstrably instrumental ends, i.e. improved self-confidence (= a *better* person), a new sense of civic pride (= a *better* citizen), a commitment to support Others struggling in community (= a *better* neighbor). Yet it is unclear how, to an action anthropologist at least, "feelings" can be so easily isolated. Shusterman picks this up in discussing Wittgenstein's position on the use and articulation of emotions, feelings and sensations in our lives. "Voluntary action, like emotion," Shusterman writes, "can only be explained in terms of a whole surrounding context of life, aims, and practices" (1997, p. 96): what Wittgenstein called the "whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action" (Wittgenstein 1959). Iris Murdoch (1997[1956]) famously raised a similar concern. She worried that the aspect of human life where we are free to choose is now the picture of human being which, without having merit, nevertheless "strips the human of her reality" (Forsberg, 2011, p. 15). Given the complicated "texture of man's being" as Murdoch (1997 [1956], p. 39) described it, "we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over" (Murdoch, 1997 [1956], p. 329 quoted in Forsberg, 2011, p. 15).

This is also the somaesthetic point that the self is a locus of (personal) responsibility yet essentially formed by society - we are, after all, as William James wrote, "bundles of habits." Due to this condition, much of our life is lived spontaneously, unconsciously. Indeed, in returning to Shusterman's summons, why would we separate words and voices from speaker's bodies? This includes the body of the acting anthropologist. Thinking somaesthetically, the skills of the action anthropologist return to a fieldworker's bodily and spontaneously responsive relations to Others in the course of their ordinary and everyday lives. The ethics and aesthetics of undertaking action research is in the social and bodily efforts of a person – a fieldworker or likewise a participant – to try (over and over, for the next first time) to find their feet with Others.

Anticipating but also overlapping with certain tendencies in anthropological thought (see Desjarlais 1992), Shusterman's position is that the body is not just the site of the oppressive workings of power but also the vehicle for emancipation and liberation (Koczanowicz, 2023, p. x). If the "soma" – that is, "the lived, perceptive, sentient body" – plays such a formative role in mediating every facet of our ordinary existence, then it follows, Shusterman argues, that the "quest for self-knowledge and self-improvement," (the values I identify as energizing the action turn), "should thus involve somatic self-cultivation" (2014, p. 5).

But what does "somatic self-cultivation" look like? What does it involve? Indeed, what is its relevance in a social and political context? To his credit, Shusterman (2014) clearly states that he does not conceive of "somaesthetic cultivation" as a replacement for political or socially activist engagement. Instead, he conceives of it "as a means of strengthening our somatic capacities (which include our capacities for courage, endurance, empathetic social perception and nurturing care) so that we are better equipped to engage in social and political struggles" (2014, p. 8). This is a keen distinction. Yet it is not all that new. Of course, Shusterman (2012) himself reaches back into Confucianist thought to contextualize his claims but, I would argue, Sol Tax also showed a sense for the somaesthetic in his writings.

On "Probing, Listening, Learning, Giving In"

Come the late 1950s, Tax struggled with wording his break from the discipline's dominant scientific paradigm. In one particularly striking passage, however, he declared: "[o]ur program is positive, not negative, it is a program of action not inaction; but it is a program of probing, listening, learning, giving in" (1975, p. 516). Tax's 'but' here is, much like the paradigmatic break he was trying to get at, awkward and unrefined but it is significant. He was establishing a professional distance from the "planning-based approach" to solving social - so-called "tribal" - problems that colonial governments of the time employed anthropologists to work on (Smith 2010). In contrast, Tax was introducing a different kind of program; one now oriented around a distinctly embodied skillset – he identified these as: *probing, listening, learning, giving in.* Talking is not named here. Instead, Tax chooses to emphasize these more interpersonal facets of relating to an Other.

Tax's move is important. It steers the locus of action away from the idea of a self-contained and self-conscious agent acting in accordance to a prior plan and towards a new kind of anthropological practice undertaken in a relational (cultural) space in which people (or persons) are responding – mostly spontaneously and unthinkingly – to events occurring around them (Shotter, 2004, p. 449). The internal but also collective voice that this new action-oriented practitioner relies on for professional guidance then shifts: no longer asking what should I do? But, how do I act in response?

I take Tax as pointing to something new about seeing action *this* way. Just as we, as human beings, necessarily *learn* (throughout our lives) how to probe, how to listen, and how to give in, we also - as Wittgenstein (1959) is at pains to remind us - *learn* how to learn. To call these and other such facets of human behavior "skills" is not to disregard their culturally formative role in human social development, but neither is it to preclude the possibility of their cultivation or improvement. Taken thus, Tax's program of action anthropology points to difficulties not of the problem-solving, rational 'intellect' but of a different kind – just what kind?

Difficulties of the will

Put it this way: any action project presupposes a problem. If all problems are *human* problems then it follows that they must arise in the ordinary and everyday lives of *actual* people (Das, 2012, p. 133). As above, this means that they can neither be abstracted from the everyday mundane circumstances people inhabit nor from the contexts of ordinary life which, as JL Austin, Stanley Cavell and anthropologists like Veena Das and Michael Lambek have shown, is much more fragile and vulnerable to disagreements, ruptures and failures than most social sciences care to entertain.

To get at a "problem" is to understand, or get a feel for, its qualities, for the connections it inspires, for the emotions it evokes and for the words that people afford it (Saito & Standish 2009), or as Tax put it, what the fieldworker "must" do is "guess and improvise, and in some degree always play by feel" (1975, p. 516). This returns to Tax's insistence that fieldwork is the context in which action is best pursued because it requires anthropologists to live with and alongside people in order to try to grasp a sense of people's attitudes towards the world (Tax 1975). The character of this difficulty is social not logical. It is a question of orienting oneself in an Other world. It is what Wittgenstein called 'difficulties of the will'.

As John Shotter puts it, 'difficulties of the will':

> are to do with how we might orient ourselves *bodily* towards events occurring around us, how we can relate ourselves to them, and to get ourselves ready for seeing, hearing, experiencing, and valuing what we encounter as we move forward with our lives—for these are the ways

> that will organize our lookings and listenings, our sense-makings and judgments of value, and thus ultimately, determine the lines of action we resolve on carrying out further. (my italics; 2013, p. 142)

As anthropologists are acutely aware, orienting oneself in the lifeworld of other peoples is less a cognitive or interpretive task than a bodily undertaking, one that intimately involves "*reciprocal* activities and *inter*experiences" (Jackson, 1989, p. 3). The implication is that there is no stable or substantial self. Instead, the self becomes a site of experimentation, an experiential locus from which, in the case of anthropology, the fieldworker "test[s] and explor[es] the ways in which our experiences conjoin or connect us with others, rather than the ways they set us apart" (Jackson, 1989, p. 4). In some fundamental but not foundational way, the task of anthropology is to get a bodily sense for how things cohere (aesthetically) in people's lives, "to apprehend and experience their style, tone, texture and overall mood and spirit" (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 1116).

The Art of Action Anthropology

Obviously, I am playing loose in this paper with the boundaries between different kinds of action inquiry within, but also external to, the discipline: i.e. "action research" (AR). Yet much learning in AR is, I find, anthropologically informed. So I pay attention when, for instance, Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2001) in the introductory chapter to their immensely popular *Sage Handbook on Action Research* state that: "action research cannot be programmatic and cannot be defined in terms of hard and fast methods, but is, in Lyotard's (1979) sense, a work of art" (2001, p. 2). They choose not to elaborate on exactly what Lyotard's "sense" is but I can quickly fill in the gap. In his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard was preoccupied by an emergent "split", as he saw it, in the production of art. On the one hand, he argued, there was art that satisfied the "mass conformism" of the rule-following market (i.e. the standard of beautiful and desirable art). On the other hand, however, were emergent and experimentalist works that interrogated their own claim to artistic value through the production of their own criteria for (public) evaluation (Lyotard, 1979, p. 75).

The parallel is one of orthodoxy versus a counter-hegemonic ethic. In the former, the researcher follows strict protocols and fixed procedures which simultaneously serve as the method to evaluate the quality and validity of the researcher's work and outcomes. An action approach strikes a different path. It privileges the autonomy of individuals to take control of the change-focused research process but in an open-ended way that avoids closure, or the narrowing of self-inquiry, to a particular outcome. This kind of change, as Adam Phillips astutely observes, "can be evaluated only prospectively and retrospectively, but never finally or definitively" meaning that "the only evaluation is an ongoing evaluation" (2021, p. 95). Allowing ordinary people – the participants – to create the criteria by which to judge and appreciate their own process is, in Lyotard's terms, a progressively experimentalist and aesthetic process.

Intuitively, I am reminded here of Nancy Lurie, a former collaborator of Tax's, who noted that what she had learned from her years of working for and with Indigenous communities across the US was that "[a]ction anthropology requires a finely tuned ear that is always tuned in" (Lurie, 1973, p. 7). What she was grasping at was the experience of being in a room where things are being said without being said in an entangled and complicated and implicit context of interpersonal relations, (colonizing) histories and political rivalries. Words matter as do the bodies from which they issue and within which they resonate. It is not only what is said but the context in which people are using words; people's voices, after all, are filled with "human breath" (Laugier 2020). Attention to people's voices therefore always return to the everyday scenarios

and situations in which people are figuring out how to go on by *probing, listening, learning, giving in* and so on.

How to go on in the next moment in *this* situation is what is at stake for any person in the context of an action project – acknowledging or, avoiding, their connections to Others. Anthropologists recognize that it is the *this* which matters for people; *this* practice, thought, word, ritual, moment, way of doing things. How this affects action anthropology might appear tangential, particularly in light of the links I make above between the action project and "self-knowledge". I do not think that a concern. It only turns on what we mean by "self-knowledge" in the context of transformation. Usefully, and to this very point, Shusterman refers to self-knowledge as "probing one's present limits so as to grasp the needed dimensions and directions of change" (1997, p. 40). This surfaces a useful connection between self-knowledge and the task of 'voicing one's condition' because, as orienting activities, they inevitably refer to the same fragility and depth of claims a person makes to community, about who *I* am in relation to *us*, about how *my* need is also *our* need (Cavell 1999[1979]).

In anthropological practice, the concept of action does not provoke philosophical questions of causes but attends, instead, to the particular (local) ways, styles and forms of expression people use to make themselves intelligible. Mutual intelligibility – the driving force of the action process – is not a logical process but a social and somaesthetic activity. It is reliant on how people orient themselves within a "complex of values, resonances and sensibilities" (Desjarlais 1992) that not only shape the rhythms of ordinary experience but also determine the stakes and possibilities of 'what could happen if…'.

This is why, for me at least, Wittgenstein's 'difficulties of the will' are in a matter of fact way the somaesthetic concerns and anxieties of fieldworking. The very possibility of the social encounter returns to how we "orient ourselves bodily" – and it *is* 'bodily'; it is our somatic life which ultimately qualifies how we figure out how to "move forward with our lives" (Shotter 2013). For what organizes our "lookings and listenings" and "our sense-makings and judgements of value" is our somatic experience in accordance to an "aesthetics of everyday life" (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 1106).

4. Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, I re-emphasize the experimental and exploratory character of this paper yet more than a mere creative exercise, the value of the intersection, as I see it, between somaesthetics and anthropology is as a reminder to fieldworkers of the somatic capacities and bodily conditions which underpin and suffuse the efforts of people to bring about change in their lives. This moves beyond Foucauldian fascination with the social production of individuals through the shaping of their bodies and embodied habits to open up, instead, the emancipatory potential of the body to transform social relations: what Leszek Koczanowicz (2023) has recently called *somapower*.

Anthropologically speaking, I cannot help but be struck by the *descent* into people's everyday that the somaesthetics project requires. It is a descent into the cultural schema(s) intrinsic to human life, for as Koczanowicz characterizes it, "the impulses to develop the body and to advance its consciousness are deeply anchored in culture, and this is where the ever-renewing emancipatory impulse of corporeality comes from" (2023, p. 39). Our existence, in other words, is not irreducibly linguistic but bodied forth (Boss 1994).

Tax, I think, intuitively *felt* this and some of his students went on to develop similar thoughts in their professional lives even if they didn't fully elaborate on it in their writings. For Tax (1975), action anthropology was irremediably social and, therefore, clinical in its capacity

to work with others in diagnosing and intervening in a "problem situation." For me, in recasting it as a contemporary approach, the potential is its practicality but such possibility should not come at the expense of "learning something in the process" (Tax 1975). What form this learning takes will obviously differ from one project to the next. But, for obvious reasons to do with why one is involved in an action approach in the first place, this learning cannot be undertaken in spite of what happens. Rather, the effort to change a situation is inextricably linked to better understanding what is at stake for all involved – for people and non-human beings – in that undertaking.

In short, the possibility of action anthropology is premised on the social encounter, the site where the self and world collide. Action anthropology will always provoke, and move along in response to, an *anthropology of action*. For what is this 'site' I speak of other than the encounter between self and world, where the self-cultivation of "somatic capacities" – i.e. courage, humility, nurturing care – signifies a person's response to the most exacting and relentless question of (human) community: "Can I bear to make myself known?" (Das, 2020, p. 17).

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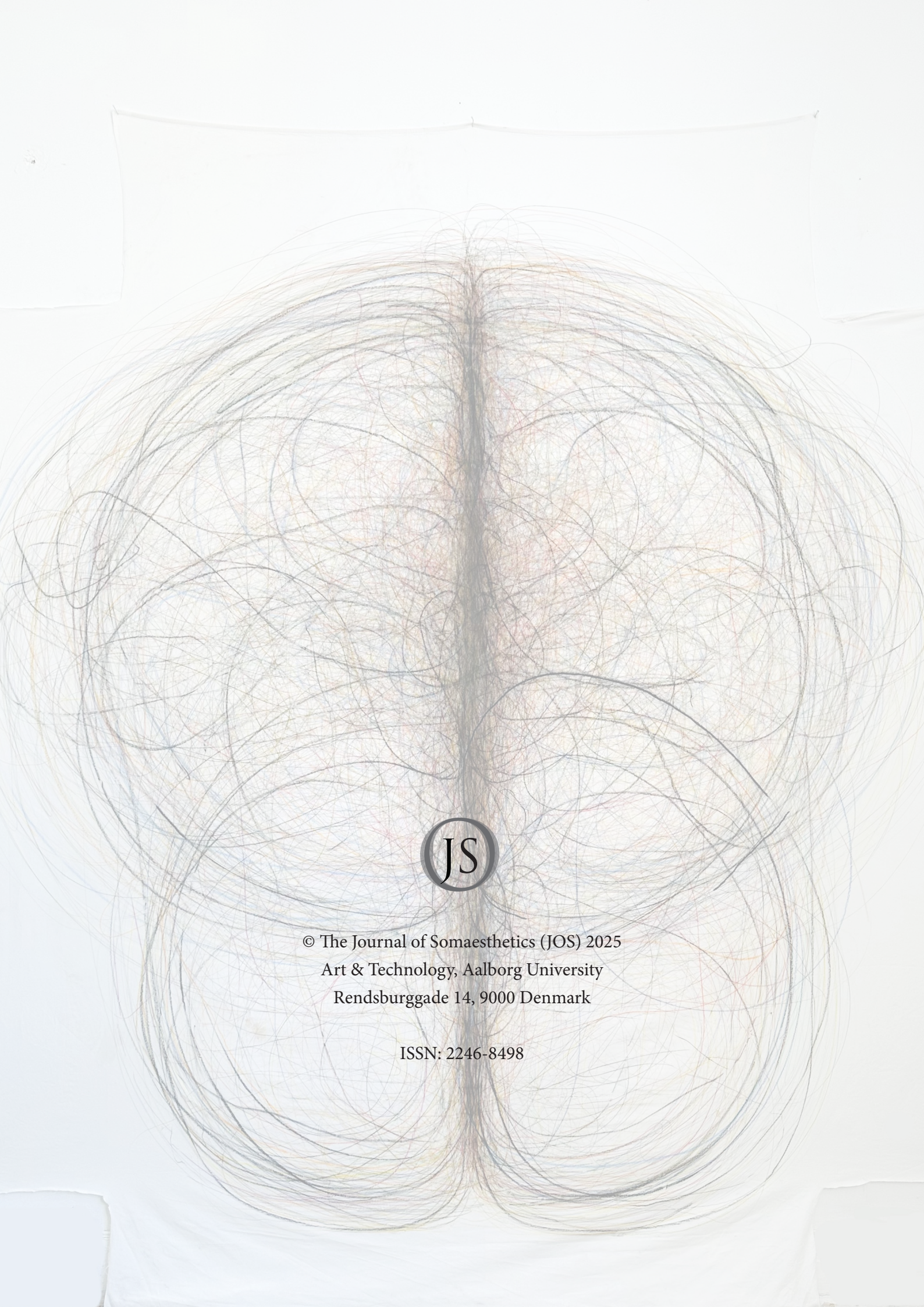

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