

# Somatic Engagement



CHAINLINKS

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*with*

Amy Sara Carroll

Katherine Sherwood

Georgina Kleege

Eleni Stecopoulos

Devora Neumark

Christan Nagler

Amber DiPietra & Denise Leto

Petra Kuppers, editor

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# Introduction

PETRA KUPPERS





Somatics: adjust how you sit. How do you hold this book? Where are you located in relation to what you are reading, which illuminations travel neuronally and which words fire you? With these questions, asking for personal attention, I open an introductory essay about individual experiences of embodied living.

In my Embodiment/Environment/Community undergraduate class, my students find out about one history of somatics through an overview essay by Martha Eddy. Eddy charts many influences and practitioners in the field, from Rudolf Laban, Moshe Feldenkrais and Ida Rolf to Anna Halprin, Joan Skinner and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. Some of Eddy's arguments resonate deeply with my students: somatic education as a pathway to taking responsibility for one's self, in the absence of hard truths, in experimentation and playful process. The students make complex and useful connections between their classroom experiences of meditation, body scans, visits in Botanical Gardens, being with plants, being with fellow humans. In our classroom we acknowledge that the written word alone is not enough: in order to understand and feel our way into the somatic, we need to engage in exercise work, observing our own

breath, and watch each other breathe. Embodied knowledge becomes a form of reading practice, and informs attention to sounds and signs, a visceral close reading. After a few weeks of conscious attention to our bodyminds, we have trained ourselves to let poems glide over us and through us, to explore language as a homeopathy of influence, a cilia connection between breath and meaning. Words break into sound fields, a sibilant infuses vibration through breath and travels across skin surfaces. Sounding words, deconstructed writing, become the basis for new, playful assemblages, liberatory somatic educational practices that can infuse writing and reading patterns. Lying on their yoga mats, my students try out phonemes in their mouth, throat, thorax, and diffuse them into torso, bone oscillation, blood dispersal. Embodied labors of attention: that is one of my working definitions of the somatic field.

There are other ways of telling the narrative of the somatic. One pathway would be through contemporary articulations of ancient practices. In the wider somatics field, people pay attention to yoga, chakras and Sanskrit, to Vedic prosodic vibration as life energy, to the hallucinatory or ecstatic properties of soma libations. In this collection, painter Katherine Sherwood and her witness Georgina Kleege call upon mystical connections, dense complexities of signs both ancient and modern, through healing biblical seals, contemporary angiograms and brain imaging, layered into paintings of thick colors, textures and reference fields. Eleni Stecopoulos's essay articulates the challenges of cultural appropriation in healing practices, and the opportunities afforded the traveller in embodied metaphors, playing on the edges of the (culturally) intelligible and the (personally) sensate.

10 In my own art work, I am drawn to the brain-altering effects of hymns, shaman rhythmicity and mass cycles, pagan

ritual practice and the mystery of transubstantiation. My atheist sensibilities are pressured by my lean into the efficacy of spiritual practice, and into the political potential of strategic essentialism. Something assembled under the sign “I” calls for identificatory community and yet finds itself, again and again, alone in a skin sack.

The somatic, in this narrative, troubles, and troubles productively. It un.masks as undesirable, and as fantasy, the universal non-needy subject, the “(pure) disembodied a-historical structure composed of differences in which no-one actually differs at all” (to follow along with Christine Wertheim’s introduction to *Feminaissance*, and its re-evaluation of strategic essentialism, 2010: xii). Revisiting foremothers’ writings is a useful tactic for feeling one’s way into the dynamic alignment of embodiment and writing. Writing on the (skin’s) periphery, exploring the hollows of shame and pleasure, charting the terrain of sensation: these are moves that inform much writing on the yoga mat. This Cixous quote offers rich nourishment:

And why don’t you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven’t written. (And why I didn’t write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it’s reserved for the great—that is for “great men”; and it’s “silly.” Besides, you’ve written a little, but in secret. And it wasn’t good, because it was in secret, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn’t go all the way, or because you wrote, irresistibly, as when we would masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as soon as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilty—so as to be forgiven; or to forget, to bury it until the next time. (Cixous, 28/29).

Somatic engagement allows us to take seriously the disavowed, to explore writing as a wayfarer, not as enemy. Claiming a space for the somatic charts out a place of pleasure and connection, an island within the roil of disidentificatory tenuousness, a strategic location for a politics of tenderness. Claiming a space and a time: “I want a word that means all three things: suspension, pause, and float,” write collaborators Amber DiPietra and Denise Leto.

The manifestos of many political artists claim new bodies, new senses, new alignments between organs and energies. As a third narrative of somatics, I could discuss Joseph Beuys’s social sculpture or Antonin Artaud’s athletes of the heart, charting connections and erecting lineages, fields of influence, the fatherland and mothertongue, the oaken tree, the homeland’s soil.

But notions of lineage and citational practice are themselves at odds with my understanding of the somatic as poetic method. The somatic is a perspectival investigation. It is dependent on the knowledge found in the subjective experience; it is first-person knowledge. This first-person wisdom is not the owned self of storytelling. It is itself queried into thin layers and skins, until the “I” fragments into the sensate textures that phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty explore as the source of subject development. Under the explorer’s scrutiny, this “I” becomes a shifting field of intensities. This is the terrain that practice-as-research artists’ favorite thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari map and warp into a politics of energetics, dependent on and connected to bodily strata.

Specificity, and the ethics of nuance. Here lies for me the politics of somatics: specific bodies, not “the body;” bodies in specific cultural alignments and webs, not “just” bodies.

12 Luce Irigaray reminds me of the requirement for location,

nuance, the politics of specificity, and the processual character of recognition:

One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an “other meaning” always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them. For if “she” says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover: rather, it is contiguous. It touches (upon). And when it strays too far from that proximity, she breaks off and starts over at “zero”: her body-sex. (29)

Irigaray’s call to highly specific process attention reverberates throughout the collection. What does it mean to listen/read/view/witness differently, through touch, through the densities of embodied, enacted, gendered, racialised, disabled flesh, to not confuse speaking with being, body or word with static meaning? What does it mean to be in touch with specificity? This is the philosophical lineage of Baruch Spinoza: “what does a body do,” not, “what is a body?”

In this collection, bodies do and reach towards one another, sometimes in electronic geographies (Amy Sara Carroll), sometimes in touch mediated by the slipperiness and membraneous multiplicity of oil (Devora Neumark), toward uncoiling the alien zones of selves (Amber diPietra and Denise Leto), toward the public sphere, toward interdisciplinarity, the textures of paint (in Katherine Sherwood’s work), languages (in both Christian Nagler and Amy Carroll’s practices), care of self and others (Devora Neumark, Eleni Stecopoulos), and attention to revelatory practices (Sherwood and Kleege). Lines do not demarcate here: the border marked in flesh can be both violation and edge zone, in Gloria Anzaldúa’s productive re-reading of the hysterics

of nation states. Bodies, in the plural, are on the line, and remake the line continuously in procedures of meaning-making; plurality within and without, intersected and interdependent.

Engagement: breathe. Taste the air, experience the permeability, the vulnerability, the strength and the dissolving presence as an “I” assembles around acts of breathing. This instruction is another narrative of this collection, an invitation to breathe, together, during a number of performance poetry events at the Subterranean Arthouse in Berkeley, California, where some of the authors in this book laid their heads next to mine. Breath, pollution, toxicity, waste and surplus, division and decay, emergence: decline your breath through these words, taste their metallic residue, mouth their fatty feel on your tongue. These are some of the instructions that ushered a group of somatic divers into border states. We are in a participatory performance, an Olimpias event (the artists’ collective I lead), in a show called Burning, a workshop and performance series that investigated cell imagery, cancer imagery, and healing journeys through ritual-based happenings infused with poetry, dramatic scenes, dances, and live drawing. We are lying on the wooden floor of the Subterranean Arthouse, an old shop-front that is now a performance space daily infused with Butoh ritual. Community participants allow themselves to open their membranes to the gift of words. Lying among this group are autistic self-advocates, people with environmental toxicity syndrome, cancer survivors and others who find themselves interpellated into chemical relation. An engagement with difference, through shared breath, space, and collaborative poetics: this is another version of the somatic inquiry, a social somatics that pays attention to the social and political effects of embodiment practices.

14      Much of the thinking about contributors and discussions of the book’s aesthetics and ethics occurred at Arnieville, a

few blocks south from the Subterranean Arthouse. The activity of breathing tainted air, tainted by metaphor, image, word and matter, connect these two sites, Burning as an art-framed community performance and Arnieville as a political performance action. Arnieville was an activist camp and tent village erected by a coalition of disabled, poor and homeless people. Its tents stood on a traffic island in a busy street, opposite the Berkeley Bowl supermarket, during May, June, and July of 2010. People slept in tents three feet away from roaring traffic, fast wheels and exhaust fumes. Activists used their physical presence in these precarious and polluted surroundings, their art, song and a large papier-mâché puppet of Arnold Schwarzenegger, complete with raised hatchet, to protest the ongoing dismantling of the social welfare system. Cuts kill, taxes save lives. Interdependence, not independence.

At Arnieville, we did create provisional community amongst people with mental health differences, addiction issues, physical disabilities and in poverty, we found multiple new alliances across racialization and impairment lines. Our activist chants engaged with the rhythm of the car wheels pounding by our island—our activist prosody, a healing magic for an ailing welfare state.

I remember: the poetics of street action played across my body, as we sat in our wheelchairs, scooters and loungers, huddled together to sun ourselves or shiver in the treacherous Northern California spring and early summer, my senses alert to the infiltrations of temperature change, of migraines held barely at bay with ever higher doses of pain killers, of the cramp setting into joints. I also remember the scent offered by the warm food neighbors brought by each day, and the settling in each day for the sharing circle, to hear and bear the different voices, different cognitive frames. The bearing was not always easy: there were tears, and shouts, and accusations, arguments, ravings, these genres' boundaries often interwoven and undecidable. I also remember the

renewed pleasures of the possibility of home when I did wheel home on many days, to connect myself differently, to plug into the electrical web and charge my wheelchair, fire up the computer. I remember my few nights' worth of disrupted, poisoned sleep in one of the tents, the concentration of traffic fumes peaking in the morning commute, my light-headed writing in the grey light of early morning hours.

I am not sure that anybody can say that Arnieville had a significant impact on the legislature. Social welfare systems are crumbling everywhere, and the people of California keep voting down anything that would cost them. The democratic process is flaying vulnerable and poor populations. Maybe some drivers and shoppers got to think differently when witnessing us on our traffic island, think differently about what they might have assumed were silent and invisible populations. Bay Area public radio and quite a few newspapers came out, and there was a good show of disability agency and interdependent self-determination in the media. But did that reach anybody who was not already in our camp, not already on the side of welfare politics and a need for taxes? I am not sure, and am rather cynical. But "politics" does not just mean effectiveness at the level of policy making. It can't be, or else many of us would have to pack up our 80s and 90s honed political tools and retire from the public arena. There is a politics of engagement and relationality, of embodied contact, of shared space and common ground.

We need to touch, and stay present to the multivalence of touch as violence, as tenderness, as invitation, as shifting border states. Audre Lorde writes, and I have to listen again and again to not fix what is said: "We tend to think of the erotic as an easy, tantalizing sexual arousal. I speak of the erotic as the deepest life force, a force which moves us toward living in a fundamental way." (Lorde, 54)

16 And that is to me the politics embodied and instantiated at times, momentarily, during Arnieville: engaging embod-



ied with difference, finding intercultural and intercorporeal resources for living, even if we know that some of us will wheel home to comfortable homespaces, and some of us will sleep on cardboard again when the tent village folds down. I can only speak about myself, in the end: but hanging out at Arnievville has changed my perspective on the homeless folk that I see around my home spaces, and I now do know some of them by name. The class divide does not miraculously lift. But for moments at a time, over shared coffee, desirously, we engage in practices of artful living, embodied poetics, an erotics of encounter, practices that halt the flow of cars, of business-as-usual, of the visibilities and invisibilities, the glib narratives, the budget bottom line, if only for a moment, a shared breath. Arnievville offered a social sculpture, and a social somatics: a therapy for the world, an unhinging of space and time, for a moment. In that unhinged time, in the long duration, after those of us who talk are talked out, we can take shared breaths, with the tinge of exhaust on our tongue.

Social somatics: these are the poetic politics embodied in our alchemical exercises in the Subterranean Arthouse, and the horizon many of the authors in this collection reach toward. Many of the writers and artists in this book sat for a while at Arnievville, or discussed its politics with me via email or on the phone, for many just one of the multiple forms of political engagement and private networks they engage in. This is a collection of connectivity, with a network of friendship and companionship embedded in it, and the rhythm of voices, brushstrokes, accents swing musically in my ear as I shape the alignment and pattern of the texts and images.

Bodies smudging the line in an aesthetics of permeability: these are not writings, images and actions of certainty. These are essays, offerings, traces of experimentation in a complex world, exchanges across multiple membranes.

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