

# Bodily semblances, temporary dwellings: somatic moulding of spaces and subjectivities

## 1. Weaving an uncertain genealogy

When I was invited to propose a workshop to the Nanopolitics group, based on the practice of Body-Mind Centering, I accepted with enthusiasm. Firstly, because the reflections that underlie the constitution of this group in many ways match the preoccupations that have moved my own research in the last few years, as well as the questions I ask myself concerning the political or micropolitical dimension of the particular *technologies of the self* referred to as methods of somatic education, or simply *somatics*.

The approach known as Body-Mind Centering (from now on abbreviated as BMC) stems from this vast field of western practices of movement, which can be historically inscribed within a marginal culture of the body that, since the beginnings of the twentieth century<sup>1</sup>, has occupied an interval between legitimate disciplines (institutional medicine, hygiene, care), and empirical forms of knowledge.

To sum up BMC in a few words, I will quote its founder, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen<sup>2</sup>: “(...) It is an integrated and embodied approach to movement, the body and consciousness...an experiential study based on the embodiment and application of anatomical, physiological, psychophysical and developmental principles, utilizing movement, touch, voice and mind”<sup>3</sup>.

Like many other methods (Feldenkrais, Alexander, Eutony, Laban-Bartenieff Fundamentals, Kinetic Awareness, Rolfing, and so on), BMC explores qualitative aspects of motion, bringing forth the singularity of each individual’s sensorimotor and perceptual experience; the assumption is that a deeper differentiation, integration and articulation of movement and expression may enable a dynamic and transformative process to affect both one’s own *body image*<sup>4</sup> and one’s functional abilities.

Somatics was first formalised in the United States during the 1970s, through the initiative of the philosopher (and, later, somatic practitioner) Thomas Hanna.

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<sup>1</sup> For the history of somatics, see: J.H. Johnson (ed.), *Bone, Breath and Gesture. Practices of Embodiment*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley CA, 1995. In the introduction of his essay, Johnson traces back the origins of somatics to the end of the XIX century, throughout Europe and the US.

<sup>2</sup> Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (1942 -), an American therapist, movement artist, researcher and educator, created the School for Body-Mind Centering in 1973.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bodymindcentering.com/about>

<sup>4</sup> « A *body image* consists of a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one’s own body. In contrast, a *body schema* is a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring», Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005, p. 24. The notion of body image, though, is at the crossroad between phenomenology, psychoanalysis and the neurosciences; its first introduction, in fact, is due to the Viennese psychoanalyst Paul Schilder (*The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*, published in 1935).

His first essay, symptomatically entitled *Bodies in Revolt*, gives a new etymological foundation to the notion of the 'soma' involved in these methods: "the body observed from the first-person viewpoint", the body "felt from within", "the body of experience and not of objective science"<sup>5</sup>. The revolution is from the outset both perspectival and paradigmatic, announcing a shift in sensibility and knowledge, and a specific form of self-learning which relies fundamentally upon an holistic awareness of the self and the environment.

The constitution of this field of practices, along the entire twentieth century, often passes through an exemplary narrative of alternative strategies that have been elaborated and designed at a given moment, by certain individuals, towards the resolution of problems that traditionally available methods in medicine, dance, physical education and psychology could not offer. From those first, empirical researches, *self-trained* founders – often drawing from a wide background and formation in traditional therapies, dance, movement and the performing arts – came to develop specific training programs and schools, most often refusing to frame their methods as *therapies*, and preferring to highlight their self-educational and pedagogical dimension. In fact, in order to preserve their autonomy with regard to the institutional field of care, somatic schools developed a self-sustained economy, based on trademarking, copyrighting and licensing fees – with evident repercussions on the costs of training.

Despite the feeble institutional recognition they encounter today in some countries, where they are beginning to be affiliated with paramedical practices of functional rehabilitation, investigated in clinical research protocols or integrated in some university curricula, somatics are very unequally distributed, which is also a sign of their complicated genealogical mix: while informed, in some aspects, by ancient eastern traditions (meditation, yoga, martial arts...), or gravitating towards the constellation of New Age philosophies (due to geographical and historical contiguity), they have been massively appropriated by the markets of well-being and personal development, with their paradoxical montages of esoteric spirituality and consumption, consistent in the end with the neoliberal rhetoric of post-capitalism.

So how to orient oneself in this jungle of ambivalences? And how to understand the catalytic role that the aesthetic revolution of somatics brought about in the history of dance, theatre and performance, by transforming uses and representations of the body?

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<sup>5</sup> T. Hanna, *Bodies in Revolt. A Primer in Somatic Thinking*, Free Person Press, Novato CA, 1970. In particular, Hanna writes: "*Soma* does not mean *body*; it means 'Me, the Bodily Being'. *Body* has, for me, the connotation of a piece of meat (...). *Soma* is living; it is expanding and contracting, accommodating and assimilating, drawing in energy and expelling energies", *Cit.* p. 35  
In doing so, "Hanna recovered the older Christian mystical use of the term, whose source is in the New Testament. Paul distinguishes between the Greek word *sarx*, which has a sense of 'a hunk of meat', from *soma*, which Paul used to designate the luminous body transformed by faith", J.H. Johnson, "Introduction", *op.cit.*, p. XV

Incidentally, a revolutionary potential of transformation is affirmed by numerous founders of different somatic schools. Thomas Hanna himself inaugurates this path with the particular messianic style that fills *Bodies in Revolt*: strangely enough, his visionary, utopian proposals oscillate between a hymn to technological progress and an accusation of traditionalist western society and culture, forecasting the coming of a new humanity, a mutant species that will fulfil the promises of its evolutionary destiny, in a world finally liberated from its atavistic fears and the domination of rational knowledge.

With caustic irony, Hanna depicts the dead end that both ‘militants’ and ‘hippies’ were facing in American counterculture:

“The somatic imbalance of the Hippies and the Militants means that, adaptationally, they are maimed somewhat like the very cultural traditionalists whom they are either fleeing or attacking. The short-lived destiny of these two group-expressions of proto-mutation is due to the fact that they have one foot in the technological environment (a positive adaptational factor) and one foot in the moribund cultural tradition (a negative adaptational factor) upon which they must depend in order to orient themselves”.<sup>6</sup>

Right or wrong, Hanna’s clearance of history reveals the political ambivalences of somatics, most of all in his unsettling discourse on adaptation and assimilation, which is built upon an almost transcendent vision of human evolution, and seems to ignore the disquieting operations with which capitalism annexes the myth of ‘individual emancipation’, and the tentacles of contemporary biopolitics.

The first gesture towards a critique of usage, or towards a critical use of this body of practices, would perhaps be to draw a completely *exogenous* constellation of references, a field of ethical and political concerns that is capable of holding together historical symptoms as well as the questioning and mobile tensions of the present.

It is in this sense that the recent discovery of the work of a filmmaker – who couldn’t be farther away from this entire domain –, allowed me to uncover a new thread of a possible genealogy. Robert Kramer, member of the militant cinema collective “Newsreel” in the New York 60s, has (among others) made two emblematic films that intertwine documentary and fiction: *Ice* (1970), a science-fiction film that projects a guerrilla scenario, enacted at the heart of the American

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T. Hanna, *op. cit.*, p. 258

empire, based on small nuclei of armed struggle; and *Milestones* (1975), which follows the defeat of the political imagination and of the revolutionary hopes of that generation, in trying to map out the aftermath of these movements, their shift towards new forms of life.

Interviewed in 1976 on the occasion of the screening of this film at the Cannes Film Festival, together with the co—director John Douglas, Kramer evokes the historical turning point that is represented in *Milestones*:

“A lot of people say that the 70s is like a time of falling away from political militancy. There’s a sense in which that’s true – if emphasis is put on the word militant, and a strong, sustained confrontation with the powers that be. But there’s another sense in which that’s not true, because we came to a dead end, and it seemed as though we couldn’t continue to be militant in that same way. That’s to say we didn’t have enough stamina (...)”<sup>7</sup>.

The abandonment of political action yields to a proliferation of micropolitical experiences: the creation of communities, experimentation with various healing techniques, the invention of intimate, poetic, groping and creative practices, are all attempts in constructing new pathways of relations that might weave collective and individual experiences together, in a new genealogy of filiations and alliances that questions the inadequacies of the traditional nuclear family. It is significant that the film opens and ends with the story of an old woman, who arrived in New York at the beginning of the century during the massive surge of immigration, recalling the small jobs she accumulated beginning with her very first occupation as dress-maker.

*Milestones*, indeed, seems to expose fractures while repairing and sewing them in a common, living tissue: the apparent atomisation of individual lives that takes over all of the characters in the movie – Kramer casts at least a dozen co-equal characters whose lives are densely interwoven – is rather a search for re-appropriating and re-weaving the molecular affects, gestures and intensities that the molar modalities of certain struggles had cast off during the previous decade.

In so doing, the film questions the fundamental relation of individual and group – the collective understood, as Simondon suggests, as a transindividual process rather than the alignment to an

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<sup>7</sup> R. Kramer, J. Douglas, « Reclaiming our past, reclaiming our beginning », interview with G. Roy Levin, in *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, n° 10-11, p. 6-8. Online link: [www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC10-11folder/KramerDouglasIntLevin.html](http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC10-11folder/KramerDouglasIntLevin.html)

ideological stance (“I don’t want to act any more out of guilt or habit, or because I learned I ought to”, says a character).

The interconnectedness that knits the narrative, jumping from one character or group to another, from cultural history to personal history, is echoed in the leitmotiv of texture and weave, and the long master-shot of a home birth literally witnesses a becoming that involves more than one life.

It is as though the loosening of any and all strong ties to the past would reveal a reticular structure, something like an interstitial tissue, and simultaneously blur the contours of figures and forms (“In some ways, after working with you, I feel less defined”, says a girl to her friend, after an acupuncture session that takes place in a tent planted in the middle of the woods, where the commune has settled).

*Milestones* maps individual trajectories through the experiences of other modes of relation to life: a relation to an environment that is at once pragmatic and speculative, a relation to history and its violence that brings inevitably into play *pathic* resonance and vulnerability to the affects and forces of the world. It shows, therefore, a process of re-subjectivation that operates at the moving threshold of de-subjectivation, where the possibility of deploying a new distribution of the sensible hinges.

## 2. More than one body

Here I would like to entwine the thread of my somatic reflections.

In trying to describe the kind of perceptual explorations we practice in BMC, I will take a few examples from the pages of Linda Hartley’s *Wisdom of the Body Moving*:

*“Begin by lying on your back on the floor (if you wish, you can use small cushions under your head and knees for greater comfort). Close your eyes.*

*Feel the places where your body makes contact with the ground; sense the floor spreading out around you, in all directions, supporting your weight; imagine the foundations of the building reaching deep into the heart of the earth, too (...)*

*Let your body soften and spread to meet the ground that is holding you. Feel your skin opening to receive the touch of earth and air.*

*Now observe the movement of your breath flowing gently in and out, connecting your inner space with the surrounding space. Notice where in your body the rising and falling*

*rhythm is deepest; as you relax more, this movement may change.*

*Can you feel this filling and emptying motion spreading through your whole body, into the chest, the abdomen, and right down into the pelvic area? Allow the breath to move you. Can you imagine it going into your arms and legs, as far as your fingers and toes, and up into your face and head? (As your attention travels like this around your body, there may be places where it is hard to feel or imagine the breath going, areas that seem dark and difficult to contact. Don't force the breath; just observe)."<sup>8</sup>*

The exploration described above is quite common in somatics, as well as in many relaxation techniques. The initial scanning of supports - recording the contacts with the ground -, the perception of weight and gravity, the open attention to breath, the observation of tiny, inner rhythms and movements, are the basic setting of the somatic listening, and they affect the quality of tone and the pre-movement attitude.

Tone, generally understood as the (metastable) state of readiness to action – that is, in neuromuscular terms, the more or less variable degree of muscle contraction – is fundamentally linked to our experience of the gravitational pull. Such experience, taking place in every moment below the level of conscious awareness, is actually an on-going negotiation between the body and gravity, which relies upon the automatic organization of our orientation in space. Tone, or better, *tonic function*, according to the definition of French movement's therapist Hubert Godard<sup>9</sup>, is thus a complex system: anatomically, it involves the parts of the body – brain, nerve pathways, fascia, muscle spindles, Golgi tendon organs and other stretch receptors – that coordinate our dynamic response to gravity (as well as our apparent stillness in standing). In somatic terms, the more we train our sensory and perceptual awareness, the more we allow other expressions and movements to unfold, opening the range of our *responsive* ability (it's in this sense that I can think of *adaptation* or *adaptability*): “when the movement control system responds automatically to gravity or to circumstances that mimic gravity, it does so much more economically, effectively and pleasurably than when control is purely voluntary”<sup>10</sup>.

Fundamentally relational, tone is therefore a temporal notion – like the invisible phrasing of our own gestural net, or the rhythm of our personal, idiosyncratic tensional distribution. In the gravitational field, whether lying or standing, the body is an event, moved and modulated by

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<sup>8</sup> L. Hartley, *Wisdom of the Body Moving. An Introduction to Body-Mind Centering*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley CA, 1989, p. 18

<sup>9</sup> See: Aline Newton, “Basic Concepts in the Theory of Hubert Godard”, in *Rolf Line*, vol. 23, 1995, p. 32-43

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Frank, “Tonic Function. A Gravity Response Model For Rolfing Structural and Movement Integration”, in *Rolf Line*, vol. 23, 1995, p. 12-20. For articles related to Hubert Godard's work, see: <http://www.somatics.de>

the polarity between earth and sky.

Drawing from the principle of polarities organizing exchanges, and therefore providing the space for differentials and intensities to emerge, BMC considers tone as the interplay of several processes that happen below the higher brain levels of registration and control. That is to say that prior to sensing, prior to kinaesthetic and proprioceptive information<sup>11</sup> – eventually available and retrievable through conscious sensorimotor monitoring –, there is a living field of metabolic processes, which BMC *contemplates*, and traces back from physiological systems to tissues, membranes, fluids, cells.

As Linda Hartley writes, following the previous exploration:

*“Become aware that your body is made up of billions of tiny living cells. Each cell is different, but each has the same basic structure: a nucleus at the centre surrounded by cytoplasm, which consists of 70 to 80 percent water and molecules of various kinds, and a semi-permeable membrane that envelops the cells and forms its outer boundary. Through these membranes the cells are breathing, minutely expanding and contracting, out from and in towards the centre, in a pulse of life taking place throughout the whole body.*

*As you listen, the breathing of the cells may give rise to the perception of a subtle pulsing, vibrating, or tingling, a sensation of heat, or perhaps an undulating rhythm of movement throughout your whole body; there may also arise a sense of deep stillness and peace. Be open to perceiving a sensation of the cells breathing, to feeling this rhythm. This is not the rhythm of the breath coming in and out of the lungs, nor the throbbing of the heart that you may also be able to feel; go deeper.*

*Again you can let your attention travel into areas where before it was harder to feel your breath or make contact and allow the cells there to breath fully.*

*Feel the body as a whole, every part alive with this very subtle pulsation. Hold lightly in your awareness the knowledge that your body is one connected entity that at the same time consists of billions of tiny individuals breathing cells.”<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> *Proprioception* is the sense of the relative position of neighboring parts of the body and strength of effort being employed in movement. It is distinguished from *exteroception*, by which one perceives the outside world, and *interoception*, by which one perceives pain, hunger, etc., and the movement of internal organs.

Proprioception refers to the integration of several sensorial modalities concerning body movement in space, its equilibrium and balance: vestibular system, joints receptors, pressure receptors, etc. Although the word *kinesthesia* is sometimes used interchangeably with proprioception, kinesthesia is the general sense of body motion.

<sup>12</sup> L. Hartley, *op. cit.*, p. 19-21

### 3. Cartographies of an uncharted territory

Lewis Carroll, in his poem *The Hunting of the Snark*, tells us that in order to capture the mythical animal, we might use map that is “a perfect and absolute blank”<sup>13</sup>.

What are they there for, then, the anatomical and physiological maps that are used in BMC, if what we attend to is precisely the uncharted, singular, diffuse landscape of those life processes that happen far below the threshold of consciousness?

And moreover, how to deal with the facticity of anatomical and biological discourses, their historical and ideological construction, if we are to “invent” a new experience and sense of the body, far away from any transcendent or universal claim of truth, from normative prescriptions and interpretations?

To understand the particular use of anatomy and physiology in BMC, I think that we have to withdraw from the very idea of truth: this means, somehow, assuming that we don't know if what we are looking for exists – but that only what we find exists.

On this premise, the use of images and maps is nothing but a certain setting, or preparation of the exploration, a way to carve attention and orientation, a fictional tool for producing affects and sensations: the image, therefore, hints to a certain intensity, and projects or anticipates our next step in the landscape-to-come, like an inner compass.

Anatomy is put at a distance from the medical and scientific discourse, and transferred into the experimental realm – dynamic and poetic – of sensorial and affective speculation. Cohen gives an example of it, in referring to the exploration of the organ system:

“Feel a ‘place’ in your body, somewhere in the contents of your pelvic, abdominal, thoracic or cranial cavities, inside your skeletal-muscular container. You do not need to know the name or function of that ‘place’, but you can simply use your sensory mindfulness to localize your focus. Or, locate the organs in an anatomy book and study their names, size, shape, location and function. Then utilize your imagination to transfer that information to your body.”<sup>14</sup>

These two procedures, which Cohen calls *somatisation* and *visualisation* respectively, are

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<sup>13</sup> I'm indebted to Mårten Spångberg for pointing this section of Carroll's poem in his conversation with Silvia Bottioli: « Fellow Travelers », in *The Swedish Dance History* Vol. 4, 2013

<sup>14</sup> B. B. Cohen, *Sensing, Feeling and Action. The Experiential Anatomy of Body-Mind Centering*, Contact Editions, Northampton MA, 2008 (1993 for the first edition), p. 31



differently linked to sensation and image through a kind of interlacing that's also a dynamic transfer: from sensation (kinaesthetic) to the image, from the image to sensation.

If the living body is an event, a process of forms and forces, its developmental history – as it is conceived in BMC – is virtually 'available' as an immanent, non-chronological and non-linear source of becoming. Drawing from embryology, for instance, Cohen proposes to explore 'what does it feel like' to have not yet a mouth, not yet a differentiated structural organization (somehow: how to make a 'Body without Organs'), but just six limb buds radiating from, and moving around the navel.

'What does it feel like' needs to be understood as both a performative play<sup>15</sup>, and a *transductive* experiment of kinaesthetic empathy, from image to sensation.

Here is the description Hartley makes of the *navel radiation* exploration:

*"Begin by finding a comfortable place to lie down, preferably on your back. Close your eyes and spend some time focusing on cellular breathing, as in the previous exercise. (These two exercises can be explored together, to help you experience their interrelationship).*

*Imagine your breath entering through the navel, filling the middle of the body, front to back, and side to side, and radiating from there to all parts of the body on the inhalation; as you exhale and empty, imagine that the breath flows out through the navel again. Keep imagining this movement of the breath until you can begin to feel the flow of energy, carried by the breath, through each limb – from the navel to the fingers, toes, top of the head, and tail of the spine, filling as you inhale – then returning back to the centre again, emptying out as you exhale. Stay with this until you can feel the sensations of this subtle movement of breath spreading equally through all six limbs. Focus on allowing the cells to breathe wherever you experience a lack of connection [...]."*<sup>16</sup>

The underlying rhythm of the breath - this condensing-expanding motion connecting center and periphery - is then amplified and transferred to larger impulses: one experiments with beginning movement from the navel, sequencing it outward to the end of each limb, or beginning movement from the ends of each limb and sequencing inward to the navel.

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<sup>15</sup> Isabelle Ginot has developed the analysis of the performative regime of somatic discourses in her article: "From Shusterman's Somaesthetics to a Radical Epistemology of Somatics", in *Dance research journal*, n°42, University of Illinois Press, Champaign (USA), summer 2010, p. 12-29. Available online at : [http://www.danse.univ-paris8.fr/chercheur\\_bibliographie.php?cc\\_id=4&ch\\_id=11](http://www.danse.univ-paris8.fr/chercheur_bibliographie.php?cc_id=4&ch_id=11)

<sup>16</sup> L. Hartley, *op. cit.*, p. 34-35

As one finds the connections of each of the six limbs into the navel, one can experiment with their relationships to each other through the navel; in this process of differentiating and integrating all of the extremities, the emerging map creates a baseline for further explorations in space, providing support for more active movements:

*"[...] Begin to feel the floor with your hands, feet, head, and tail, allowing the earth to support you through them. As you release your weight into the ground, feel how it responds by supporting and pushing back, right through your centre and beyond. As your movement becomes even more active, open your eyes and receive your environment through them and feel how it, too, supports you. Allow yourself to become more present again to the room. (Again, you might use music for this last part, opening your hearing to the sound and letting it, too, move and support you).*

*You may wish to come gradually up onto your feet, using the internal connections of the navel radiation pattern for support as you move from the floor through changing levels – rolling, sitting, kneeling, squatting hands and knees, and so on. From here you can explore the relationships of limbs and centre in improvised dance movements.*

*Finally come to stillness to acknowledge the end of the exploration, maintaining awareness of your centre and six extremities, and the sense of connectedness throughout your whole body [...]."*<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. Tuning tones: haptic relations

From the point of view of developmental psychology, bodily self-awareness builds on the simultaneous phenomenon of perceiving the world and perceiving oneself, that is to say that proprioceptive perception is triggered by exteroceptive perception<sup>18</sup>.

The notion of *haptics*, proposed by James J. Gibson<sup>19</sup> in 1962, in the framework of his ecological psychology, points to the interlacing of sensory and kinaesthetic events occurring in

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<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 36-37

<sup>18</sup> This view comes from the seminal work of French psychologist and psychiatrist Henri Wallon (1879-1962). Rather than viewing the individual as an isolated phenomenon that comes into being through self-propagating processes, Wallon understood the human child's development as determined by both physical and social environment. Lacan turns to Wallon to support his idea that the perception of an "I" in the psyche of the developing child is not a natural, internal occurrence comparable to physical growth or to cutting teeth, but is rather the effect of an encounter with an "other," the child's identification with a reflection in the mirror or with another human being.

<sup>19</sup> J.J. Gibson, "Observations on Active Touch", in *Psychological Review*, vol. 69, n°6, November 1962.

the experience of touch. Neither purely passive (as cutaneous tactile perception), nor purely palpatory or motor, the haptic dimension measures the slippage from a peripheral to a focal sense. Thus, the selective reception (i.e. the action of perception) of the sensorial flow of stimuli, as well as the disclosure of potential actions in the environment (what Gibson calls *affordances*<sup>20</sup>), are mutually constructive of each other, and correlatively constitute a *subject* and a *milieu*. It is for this reason that haptics can outline the particularity of somatic experience, as much in individual explorations of the milieu of movement, as in the experiences of touch guided by the tactile listening between the partners.

Haptic perception entails an intentionality of exploring objects or environments: the hand, haptic organ par excellence, displacing itself along objects, modelling and varying its grasp, is lead by the search for the sort of stimulation that can 'make sense' for what is touched. The hand's activity is therefore 'propositive'.

The polarity of focal and peripheral references – the *self* and the environment - manifests itself in all the distal sense modalities: vision and hearing share this double regime of affection with touch, along the reversible arrow of the perceptual attitude, a moveable cursor or gradient between ego- and exo-sensitive landmarks. I can focus, for instance, my gaze on a visual field in order to extract clearly outlined shapes and figures, exercising the ability to objectify, name, historicise, analyse; or I can blur the edges of things, letting the background come to reach me, and eventually dissolving and merging in the amplified environment of my peripheral, horizontal, timeless perception (this is, perhaps, the *selflessness* that meditation aims at).

In somatics, both attitudes are necessary, but the first gesture of touch between two persons is preceded by the openness of receptivity and attention – a *floating*, non-specific listening -, that inaugurates the constitution of a common milieu, a transitional space at the limits of which the two subjectivities exist, as co-emergent selves.

To describe this tuning phase, BMC often uses verbs such as *meeting* or *matching* the tone: this points to the setting of a circular resonance, allowing information to pass in both directions, but also to the relevance of a middle, *third* space of inter-subjectivity, that doesn't merge nor abolish the two parallel (or a-parallel) paths of subjective experience.

The partners of the exploration rely on their respective gravitational sites, where a feeling for a continuity of self is held: a base upon which gestures (and images) articulate in order to come to meet the other and the space. This site is a postural, tonic dwelling, as well as an affective

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J.J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Psychology Press/ Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 1986. In particular, chapter 8: "The Theory of Affordances", p. 127-143

and emotional one, reflecting the historicity of a certain image of oneself and of one's body. The *active* person takes indeed the initiative of moulding a milieu of sensorial stimuli for the person that is being touched, but his/her gestures are radically moved, and almost blindly directed, by the perceptive and sensorial affordances of the other. Hands, therefore, both receive information and convey the vision we are holding of the movement potential we may help to free.

Tuning tones implies the synchronisation of two temporalities, or two kinds of tonic musicality and textures, woven by the gravitational invariant and the orientation in space: touch, here, is closer to hearing than to vision, since it shares the regime of sequentiality, a regime of duration and rhythms, of contraction and dilations, of silences and intensities.

This means that the tactile invitations addressed by the active partner are at the same time those that she/he can project and emulate within his/her own imaginary and perceptive dwelling: their 'efficiency' or effects, their silent enunciation, their dialogic consistence, depend on the displacement of that dwelling – the horizons it can perceive, the otherness it can host.

To hold together a transitional, transindividual space reminds of the similar experience that contact-improvisation dancers may have. Contact distributes both action and passion: I'm moved by the other, to the extent that the other is moved by me. But what actually moves, is the space of relation, recording our distances and proximities that are otherwise unrepresentable: *alterities* to which I couldn't assign a topography, nor a depth or a surface, if it is only through the otherness of the other, which allows me to meet and inhabit my own otherness.

It's remarkable that while elaborating contact-improvisation techniques in the early 70s, its founder Steve Paxton should have been inspired by the work of Daniel Stern, the psychoanalyst authoring *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*<sup>21</sup>. Stern speaks of the *affect attunement* between the baby and its mother (or the person who's taking care of it), as a tuning of two emergent subjectivities via tonic variations: an imperceptible negotiation of micro-movements, a *tonic dialogue*<sup>22</sup> mediated and modulated by contact, through *handling* and mutual *holding*<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> D. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant. A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology*, Basic Books, New York, 1985 (reprinted in 1998 by Karnac Books, London)

<sup>22</sup> *Tonic dialogue* is a notion coined by the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Julien De Ajuriaguerra, drawing from Wallon's theory of *emotional-tonic reactions*.

<sup>23</sup> *Handling* and *Holding* are the two key concepts in the theory of the pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. They relate to the early infancy experiences of touch (through the techniques of care) and support (how the child has been held and carried, from the mother to the family as a whole, and to the wider world surrounding it).

We could say that the tonic function – our whole responsiveness to the gravitational field – expresses our own past and present experiences of “holding” ourselves and to be held. It is the ‘support precedes movement’ principle – almost a refrain in somatics and BMC -, rooted in our affective history; but we could also translate this *place-holder*<sup>24</sup> function in a topological manner, as a nomadic dwelling that allows for temporarily indexing a polarity within a field of movement potentialities.

As Varela writes:

“My sense of self exists because it gives me an interface with the world. I’m ‘me’ for interactions, but my ‘I’ doesn’t substantially exist, in the sense that it can’t be localized anywhere”<sup>25</sup>.

Varela’s statement could be extended to Simondon’s theory of individuation, namely to the pages the latter consecrates to the individuation of the living:

“The living lives at the limits of itself, on its limits...The characteristic polarity of life is at the level of the membrane; it is here that life exists in an essential manner, as an aspect of a dynamic topology which itself maintains the metastability by which it exists...The entire content of internal space is topologically in contact with the contact of external space at the limits of the living: there is, in fact, no distance in topology”.<sup>26</sup>

While designing some guidelines for introducing the experience of touch in the workshop, I was reminded of Simondon’s membrane and of Varela’s theory of autopoiesis, which defines boundaries in a living, self-organized system, as the interface of recursive and circular processes between an ‘entity’ and its environment.

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<sup>24</sup> I borrow the term of ‘place-holder’ from Judith Butler’s analyses of subject and subjection: “(...) The subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a place-holder, a structure in formation. Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a “site”), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language”. J. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*, Routledge, London, p. 10-11

<sup>25</sup> F. Varela, “The Emergent Self”, in John Brockman (ed.), *The Third Culture: Beyond the Scientific Revolution*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1995. Available online: [www.edge.org/documents/ThirdCulture/d-Ch.12.html](http://www.edge.org/documents/ThirdCulture/d-Ch.12.html)

<sup>26</sup> G. Simondon, *L’individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d’information*, Millon, Grenoble, 2005. The work was first partially published in 1964, as *L’Individu et sa genèse physico-biologique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris. For the English translation, I used the passage that is quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense* (trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale), Columbia University Press, New York, 1990. p. 103-104

I proposed, then, to explore a score for touch, using images of biological membranes and connective tissues – a succinct yet heterogeneous anatomical atlas: my purpose was essentially to ‘individuate’ the different qualities that our touch could enact and emulate, relying on information about textures, chemical composition, location, density, and so on.

The layering of those strata would also phrase a specific modulation of time, orienting the gestures of attention and intention between the two partners of the hands-on exercise: from one layer of the skin to another, a changing limit, other viscosities, other rhythms and respirations, other slippages, other nets and fluid patterns.

Perhaps it’s the notion itself of spatiality that is challenged here, the partition of interiority and exteriority: as Simondon writes, the living organism is a topology of several layers of interiority and exteriority, *implication* of the outside.

That’s why, in the empirical exploration of these thresholds and levels of relative interiority, in these scrabbling experimentations, in these apparent dives into organic depths, the *in-side* is structured as *out-side*, and inversely: movement will no longer be an instance of displacement in space – that’s to say, exclusively transitive, from one point to another in space -, but withdrawal of temporal and spatial relations shaping and inflecting a smooth space, wherein the ‘body’ is but a site of passage and modulation of environments, a pulsating force of dilation and intensification.

As Deleuze writes:

“The outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside of the outside”<sup>27</sup>

The haptic dimension of the image – a ‘blind’ image, a bloc of sensations, affects and perceptions -, unfolds a landscape of tonalities and pure differences. When touch becomes haptic, it makes for the experience of moving rims, double membranes that project a relative inside and outside: a distance that listens to another distance, passing from one outside to another.

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<sup>27</sup> G. Deleuze, *Foucault* (translated and edited by S. Hand), Continuum, London/New York, 2006, p. 96-97

## 5. The imagination of the living

Body-Mind Centering is a word that may provoke some perplexity: if the term soma, in the accepted meaning of somatics, already designates embodied subjectivity – thus, according to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, the body-subject, which makes possible lived experience, overcoming the dualism between nature and consciousness -, then what it’s that still need to be centered?

Cohen borrows the idea of ‘centering’ from Mary Caroline Richards’s book about potter’s craft – “a potter brings his clay into centre on the turning wheel, and then he gives it whatever shape he wishes”<sup>28</sup> -, but unlike it, she means by that a “dynamic flow of balance around a constantly shifting focus”<sup>29</sup>, a “process and not a place of arrival”<sup>30</sup>.

In BMC, centering hints to a gesture that can begin anywhere, at whatever point, and propagates itself in any given direction: many centres as many potential sites of beginning and amplification. But what is it that begins? Cohen has often explained that the mind into question, here, doesn’t refer to a mental entity, but rather to the Buddhist notion of mind: an opening, a fundamental light that mirrors, and resonates with, the surrounding world.

In this sense, mind is the opening of a space of relation.

I would venture, then, a further hypothesis: the relation that the gesture of centering inaugurates, that which displaces itself along a sensorial path – somehow, a haptic modulation -, points to the living and the lived, to the embodied subject and to the life that exceeds it, while at the same time constituting it.

It’s in this perspective that Evan Thompson, in *Mind in Life*<sup>31</sup>, speaks of a phenomenological gap, no longer between body and mind - as in the tradition of western metaphysics -, but between lived and living, two forms of embodiment that articulate a common reference to life.

The unifying proposal of this fundamental non-identity of life with itself, or its excess over itself, is perhaps what defines spirituality as a tension towards the total transparency of lived and living, in a kind of specular circularity where all differences fade away.

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<sup>28</sup> Mary Caroline Richards, *Centering. In Pottery, Prayer and the Person*, Wesleyan University Press, 1964, p. 3. Interestingly enough, the theme of potter’s craft is also present in *Milestones*.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Aposhyan, “Foreword”, in B. B. Cohen, *op. cit.*, vii

<sup>30</sup> B. B. Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 1

<sup>31</sup> E. Thompson, *Mind in Life. Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*, Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2007

And yet, if the spiritual dimension is not absent from the discourse of Cohen, the somatic experimentation of the discontinuous continuity - of the *inseparateness* of life, as Muriel Combes points out<sup>32</sup> -, is the practice itself of this paradoxical relation.

The phenomenological gap, thus, is not there to be filled or solved at the end of a dialectical process – as for ‘integrating difference’ -, but rather is cared for as the space of further individuation and dis-individuation, as the nexus of several polarities and supplementary differential dimensions.

In this regard, the ‘lived’ – the phenomenological subject of perception – is exceeded by life: the pre-individual field of affects hints to the pre-perceptive and pre-cognitive level that is proper to what Deleuze calls ‘passive organic syntheses’.

In order to untie the repetition of a determined action/perception loop, that is to say in order for potential actions, for new gestures, to become possible, we need precisely to temporarily suspend the habitual order of perceptions and representations through which we are used to recognizing ourselves, and to re-index it in another landscape of sensibilities and affordances, in other imaginaries.

The language of biology – human anatomy and physiology, in the case of BMC -, is but one tentative representation of the living, that is, just one among many possible maps. In this sense, images are used in BMC for experiential strategies and purposes, departing from a speculation that is literally empirical. This figurative atlas functions first of all as a tracing tool, an instrument of localisation and projection of pathways - speculation on forms, differences, textures, passages, milieus, surfaces...

If *the imaginary* impregnates sensations, it’s not by way of a representational determination, or of a symbolic determinism: forms cannot be prescriptive of forces. The operation of visualisation, in fact, displaces the iconic content of the image towards its imagination, or towards its perceptive speculation and emulation.

As Thompson notes:

“(…) In visual imaging or visualizing, we do not experience mental pictures. Instead, we visualize an object or a scene by mentally enacting or entertaining a possible perceptual experience of that object or scene”.<sup>33</sup>

Haptic images draw the anatomical imaginary towards enactive imagination, in a movement

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<sup>32</sup>

M. Combes, *La vie inséparée. Vie et sujet au temps de la biopolitique*, Editions Dittmar, Paris, 2011

<sup>33</sup>

E. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 297



that with Simondon we could characterise as a ‘transductive dynamism’, that is a fundamental operation of phase-shift, in this case a leap from cognition to affect.

The cartography resulting from a certain distribution of qualities and differences is reinvested in an exploration via the deployment of a sensorimotor landscape, through an amplifying transfer: it is this excess of the imagination over the imaginary that hinders the fixation onto a single field of references, because the amplification is the counter-effectuation of the map, acceleration of other series, swelling of virtual spatial and temporal dimensions.

In this respect, the use of biological images is not metaphorical – if by metaphor we mean a binary set of correspondences, from ‘nature’ to an ultimate, symbolical order<sup>34</sup>.

Maps, in this sense, are useful for localizing – as speculative and pragmatic tools of a contingent, relative system of representation; but in BMC, more fundamentally, they trigger and fictionalise further images and sensations, eventually producing new different cartographies, according to each person’s experience. Imagination, thus, is not a return to the image from which it departs: a *repetition* of the same -, but a displacement or drift: repetition of the *different*.

It is as if the faculties of thought and imagination, in ‘jumping over’ the level of the perceived and the perceivable, mobilise *the imaginations and the contemplations that we are*. Hence Deleuze’s ‘protestation’:

“Perhaps the reason lies in the illusions of psychology, which made a fetish of activity. Its unreasonable fear of introspection allowed it to observe only that which moved. It asks how we can acquire habits in acting, but the entire theory of learning risks being misdirected so long as the prior question is not posed – namely, whether it is through acting that we acquire habits... or whether, on the contrary, it is through contemplating? Psychology regards it as established that the self cannot contemplate itself. This, however, is not the question.

The question is whether or not the self itself is a contemplation, whether it is not in itself a contemplation, and whether we can learn, form behaviour and form ourselves other than through contemplation.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> This is because medical science of anatomy draws already from metaphors, in naming and partitioning the human body – in the double regime of ‘visibilities’ and ‘discourses’, as Foucault points out.

<sup>35</sup> G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, (translated by Paul Patton), Continuum, London/New York, 2004, p. 94

It is in this sense that we may understand the relation between lived and living in the empirical explorations of BMC: a leap over – above or below – the phenomenological gap. Beneath the acting and perceiving subject, an interstitial field of ‘larval subjects’ or proto-subjectivities opens itself. It’s here that the willing subject stops managing its faculties of understanding and perception, becoming itself a ‘field’, a process of relation wherein ‘intentionalities’ are reversed: the lived turns towards the living, no less than the living turns to the lived, and informs it.

What Cohen defines as *embodiment* is however the level of experience where image is no longer the mediating instrument: the living ‘knows itself’, or rather is ‘consciousness’, before even being felt, being integrated by sensation and imagination.

Cohen seems to be strangely closed to Deleuze when she affirms that:

“Embodiment is the cell’s awareness of themselves. You let go of your conscious mapping. It is a direct experience; there are no intermediary steps or translations. There is no guide, no witness (...). In this instance, the brain is the last to know”.<sup>36</sup>

And Deleuze:

“A soul must be attributed to the heart, to the muscles, nerves and cells, but a contemplative soul whose entire function is to contract a habit. This is no mystical or barbarous hypothesis. On the contrary, habit here manifests its full generality: it concerns not only the sensory-motor habits that we have (psychologically), but also, before these, the primary habits that we are; the thousands of passive syntheses of which we are organically composed”.<sup>37</sup>

Embodiment seems to hint to a movement of successive individuations and dis-individuations: on the level of somatic experimentation, it is the care for relating to this pre-individual and pre-personal force, that allows for other body semblances, other nomadic dwellings, to emerge.

In the ‘centering’ process, thus, lived and living, affects and percepts draw two faces of a topological limit where forms and forces mutually affect each other, repeat themselves and differ, occur to each other, in a constant reversibility of two intentionalities.

This is the double sense of becoming: a desubjectivation in as far as it wrenches us from a given identity, and propels us to a new subjectivation.

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<sup>36</sup>

B. B. Cohen, “The Process of Embodiment”, in *Sensing, Feeling and Action*, op. cit., p. 158

<sup>37</sup>

G. Deleuze, op. cit., p. 95

## 6. *While we were holding it together*

But how to think together resistance and de-subjectivation? How to hold in the same space the relation to self and other(s), if not by holding the tension between an 'ethics' and a 'politics' of subjectivation?

Following Foucault, the articulation of ethics and politics can't be founded upon a categorical distinction that opposes the individual to society, or private life to public life – as if they were separate spheres upon which power is respectively enacted via disciplinary techniques (the anatomo-politics of the human body) and strategies of control and regulation (the biopolitics of the population): these modalities of intervention are interwoven, in the late works of the philosopher, by the transversal notion of government, inaugurating the most fundamental biopolitical nexus in the story of western modernity.

Muriel Combes underlines this emblematic aspect of Foucault's thinking:

“(...) If biopolitical management is characterised by the mobilisation of techniques that apply themselves to the very site of the elaboration of a relation to oneself, then the problematisation of subjectivation, and the search for new forms of subjectivity, do not constitute an ethical withdraw, but concern politics”<sup>38</sup>.

The wide project that Foucault undertook around the genealogy and the constitution of the modern subject in western culture and history, finds in the 'technologies of the self' the problematic site of articulation between ethics and politics within the sphere of an 'aesthetic of existence'.

Drawing from distinct European contexts and traditions – Greek, Roman (via Stoic philosophy), early Christianity – Foucault intended to examine those practices of self-government that aim to the institution of a relation to self, as the fundamental site of attachment to an identity, be it determined by the self or by others.

In fact, the 'care of the self' if linked, for Foucault, to the immanent tension that 'holds' the subject in the ambivalent folds of subjection and subjectivation: that is to say, as Judith Revel remarkably points out<sup>39</sup>, the attachment to an identity – whether through a deliberate or an imposed choice – is in itself a means of objectification.

If the stoic notion of 'care of the self' is a project of self-detachment – maybe, in this sense, the

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<sup>38</sup> M. Combes, *op. cit.*, p. 82

<sup>39</sup> J. Revel, *Dictionnaire Foucault*, Ellipses, Paris, 2008, p. 128

closest to other, not 'Eurocentric', geographies of selflessness -, this operation is never performed by an individuality closed in upon itself. On the contrary, the techniques analyzed by Foucault always bring into play the fundamental relation to others, or to another, whether as real or fictitious interlocutors.

In this way, far from constituting an 'hypertrophic' individualized identity, the self that is the object of such practices and trainings of self-government, knowledge and care, is not an identity: rather it is the fundamental space of relation to what's other to self – that is to say, the place of a pure potentiality that brings out the radical, reticular *otherness* informing the tissue of subjectivity.

It's this same inflexion that problematizes the biopolitical question, in invoking a force that goes beyond individual subjectivity, at the very limit of the living: impersonal, though not objective, the notion of *life* in Foucault (as in the notion of... *a life*, in Deleuze), points to the folding of the outside in the interiority of the living, and fundamentally expresses itself as the capacity of trial and error, of resistance, of creation of singular conducts and norms.

The shift from individual to collective exposure to *life*, which is to its essential vulnerability, is the genealogical repositioning that Roberto Esposito invites to undertake within the notion of community. By emphasizing the Latin term *munus*, from which both *immunitas* and *communitas* derive, and that stands for "gift", "office", "obligation", Esposito conceives community as the experience of shared vulnerability:

"This is why, if the members of a community are characterized by an obligation of gift-giving thanks to the law of the gift and of the care to be exercised toward the other, immunity implies the exemption from or the derogation of such a condition of gift-giving."<sup>40</sup>

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I often return to an interview that Agamben gave to Stany Grelet and Matthieu Potte-Bonneville, the two editors of the French magazine *Vacarme*, which was published in 1999 under the title 'A minor biopolitics'<sup>41</sup>.

The Italian philosopher was asked about the apparently apolitical turn in his own thought, particularly in relation to the place that the notion of desubjectivation may occupy, as it seems

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<sup>40</sup> T. Campbell, R. Esposito, « Interview : Roberto Esposito », in *Diacritics*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, summer 2006, vol. 36-2, p. 50

<sup>41</sup> G. Agamben, M. Potte-Bonneville, S. Grelet, "Une bio-politique mineure", in *Vacarme*, 10, winter 2000. Online link: [www.vacarme.eu.org/article255.html](http://www.vacarme.eu.org/article255.html)

to contradict the emergence, and even the possibility, of a minoritarian political subject, capable of resistance and struggle.

The engaged and militant editors of *Vacarme* were concerned about the political violence that disempowers those individuals who are already in conditions of vulnerability and precarity – such as migrants, ill or unemployed people –, and captures them via control apparatuses that secure the upholding of an identitarian categorisation based on the double mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, freezing their capacity to act. Agamben's reply seems to extend Foucault's aesthetic of existence to the hypothesis of a 'minor biopolitics', enacted within the margins of a desubjectivation process, as the strategy for re-establishing a space for becoming through this zone of 'impersonal power' and opacity that constitutes 'life itself'.

For Agamben, the 'care of the self' should be referred back to a more promising notion of 'usage': analysing, in fact, the etymology of the Greek verb 'krestai', he draws the medial and neutral position of 'use', as what that might render the typically 'mediated' nature of an action – that one is at the same time the agent and the patient of –, and therefore in keeping with the double becoming that subjectivation means within this nexus.

Agamben's ontology of modalities is echoed in his philosophy of a politics of potentialities, and goes back to the analyses he develops in *Means without End*<sup>42</sup>. It is here that he constructs the sphere of 'gestures' as the proper ethical and political field of 'pure means'.

Gesture, he says, is the suspension of action, the withdrawal of action upon itself: it unties the knot that binds action to an instrumental end, while revealing and exposing our own being-in-a-medium. The impersonality of gesture is the very condition of its appropriation, of its subjectivation: I become subject through (my) gestures.

We are not far from somatics' concerns about the interruption of the action/perception loop: as diverse as they may be, their methodologies and strategies attend precisely to the qualitative, modal experience of movement, as the source for potential changes.

In this regard, they are technologies of self, but precisely in so far as they are capable to hold and to care for the tension between subjectivation and desubjectivation, between ethics and politics, in the knot of an aesthetic of existence.

If resistance means finding new gestures to displace the diagram of power relations that we

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<sup>42</sup>

G. Agamben *Means without End. Notes on Politics*, (Translated by C. Casarino and V. Binetti) University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000

both enact and endure, we need to reconsider our own cultural categories and perceptual representations, to insinuate doubts in our certainties, and to challenge them with the singularity and the contingency of the events we are exposed to: it is indeed a time consuming task, like watching *Milestones* (more than three hours long), like knitting and unknitting theory and praxis.

Are somatics of some use in all of this? Or are they rather the comfortable 'rehearsals of utopian sensations and relations'?

I guess rehearsal time is not exhaustible in one performance.

And improvisation is a life-long practice.