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« The classroom as a field: Experimenting with somatic practices and their contribution to the anthropology of music and dance »

Christophe Apprill and Sara Le Menestrel

How can we approach the sensory dimensions of musical and dance experience as cultural anthropologists? What methodological tools can we use in our empirical research? What does happen when teachers experiment with these tools within the classroom, turning it into a field?

Our anthropology of music and dance [collective seminar](#) based at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) in Paris since 2009 has been dedicated to exploring these issues for the past three years. With Kali Argyriadis, Julien Mallet, Nicolas Puig, and Gabriel Segré, the seminar has been a place to reflect on various field methods within the realm of perceptions, body sensations, and emotions inseparable from an anthropological approach to music and dance. Rather than covering the ongoing academic discussions related to these issues, our goal has been to discuss the various modalities of the restitution of knowledge through field experiences. Our discussions included the involvement of our own body as fieldworkers, our experience of music and dance as practitioners ourselves, as well as the approach of sound studies to describe and analyze sound perceptions.

In 2017, my own research (Sara) about the therapeutic uses of mindfulness and hypnosis led me to invite a hypnotherapist and a juggler who demonstrated their collaboration using hypnosis as an artistic resource. This experience triggered further discussions about the incorporation of 3 labs within our 2018 seminar, with the intention of offering methodological tools through practice by "doing," rather than through a focus on theory and discourse. The idea was to develop a critical perspective through our own embodied experience, with the hope of refining perceptions, descriptions and analysis for our students as well as for ourselves. Assuming that we seldom take into consideration the act of perceiving in our everyday life, in public and private environments, and within academic constraints, we felt ready to take up the challenge in bringing perception to the foreground, in the legacy of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "Objective thinking ignores the subject of perception. It views the world as the field of all possible events, and treats perception as one of these events" (1945: 251). The rehabilitation of the body in cognitive science and social science since in the second half of the 20th century led to a new understanding of cognition where the act precedes language, a change of paradigm that includes the development of the notion of "embodied cognition" (Varela *et al.*, 1991). Within French anthropology, David Le Breton emphasized throughout his work, "communication [as] a multi-channeled process of which language does not have the prerogative" (1998: 41). In fact, communication as a system includes body movements such as gestures, mimics, posture, speech tone, distance of interaction, gaze, facial expressions, etc.

Reflecting here on these labs gives us the opportunity to raise questions about somatic practices as potential field research tools for cultural anthropologists. By actually doing and feeling in their own body some basic somatic experiences, by paying attention to their own senses, could we introduce students within the space of the classroom to the heuristic potential of the sensory dimension of music and dance practice? Could it give them access to another modality of understanding their social dimension? This project

was far from consensual from the start, emphasizing various positioning and sensitivities within our long-term collaborative research team. Some of us were drawn by this experimental dimension and ready to test intuitions; others were much more circumspect if not uncomfortable with the educational value of these experiences. Our (Sara and Christophe) various practices and interest in somatics (meditation, hypnosis, contact improvisation for Sara; tango instruction, and contemporary dance for Christophe) made us particularly eager to get on board.

Let's first return to the frame of these three "field" situations. All were focused on our embodied experience without any preliminary theoretical presentation or details about the type of practice considered.

The first lab involved a psychiatrist, Dina Roberts, who practices hypnotherapy and has been working with a juggler, Guillaume Martinet, from the [Defracto company](#). The classroom was rearranged so that the juggler could have the space needed to perform, with the psychiatrist standing on the side. Although we were in the position of an audience, we actually attended a rehearsal as opposed to a performance. We could ask questions at any moment. Guillaume showed us some short figures that they had worked together, sometimes using recorded instrumental music as rhythmic support. Dina was watching him carefully from a short distance, making occasional brief suggestions. After watching Guillaume practicing for a moment, we went from exchanging with him and Dina to more practice, then going back and forth between observation and practice. Echoing its goal as a therapeutic technique to "set the patient back in motion," hypnosis, according to Dina, supports Guillaume's body work. Rather than talking about the benefits of a hypnotic state, she refers to a process that helps induce and enact receptivity and presence. Presence to body sensations as well as to the environment (the audience, noises, moves, feedback, etc...). Guillaume talks about her as a coach. Since they've been working together, he says, his skills have improved tremendously. Her assistance includes techniques that they practice together and that he can also appropriate as self-hypnosis: since he spends a lot of time flying while touring, he rehearses his performance in his mind. As a result, half as many balls fall afterwards. Referring to scientific research that has established that imagination is a precondition for physical action (Jouvent, 2009), Dina reminded us that "imagining is doing." More broadly, Guillaume emphasizes her essential role in his performing and learning ability. A single juggling sequence of 1 minute involves 3 weeks of collaborative work where "she erases discouragement and weariness, she reboots me." Dina elaborates further on this process of "starting over." "It's a matter of intention and state, rather than technique (...). I assist him in something that I don't know how to do." Although Guillaume was loquacious, he admitted struggling with putting words on his experience. "It's about doing more than talking."

Two other labs involved somatic practices. Last December, I (Christophe) had us - including students and teachers - focus on what we could sense alone and in contact with others. The idea was to experiment with the three-part process « perceiving, sensing, categorizing » with an emphasis on the first two parts. This idea was drawing inspiration from [Danis Bois](#), a researcher in somatic-psychoeducation at the forefront of a new field of research based on the paradigm of the sensible: « Philosophy of the sensible interrogates the body before affect, emotion and representation, in order to access a pure subjectivity beyond individual interpretations." (Bois, 2001: 31-32).

I offered a few basic exercises: massaging ourselves for body awareness ; working in pairs for a massage from the top of the neck to the lower back; breathing together while embracing one another; experiencing weight and counterweight in pairs, in trio... At the end, we took turns standing alone facing the group and staying still and silent for one minute. This practice allowed us to become aware of the impact of our presence in a given context of interaction, as quiet, subdued and understated it might be. Through our bodily behavior, dress and gestures, we communicate signs that can be given various interpretations. After each exercise, I left some time for feedback. The goal was to put our sensory experiences into words. In my view, the workshop gave the students the opportunity to build a space for experimentation and discussion and grasp the sensory dimension of their presence. As teachers, we were for once placing them in a situation where they could link their bodily experience to an analytical perspective.

In February 2018, we invited [Matthieu Gaudeau](#), a French teacher of [Alexander Technique](#) and contact improv whom Sara had met by attending some of his classes. Contact improv is an improvised dance form between two moving bodies that are in physical contact and based on principles of gravity, momentum, touch and shared weight. We first met Matthieu to explain our intentions. Matthieu draws much of his inspiration from [Hubert Godard](#), a French dancer, instructor and researcher in somatic practices. During the workshop, we were introduced to some of the basics of contact improv: touching, giving/receiving weight, inhibiting the reflex of protecting oneself when something is thrown at us (pic 1 and 2 “giving/receiving weight” + 3 “inhibition: receiving an object thrown at us. Matthieu Gaudeau demonstrates both exercises”). Matthieu occasionally made theoretical arguments that fueled his approach and heightened the content of the practice.

In our view, these labs were an attempt to address and question the intersection between theory and practice. Experiencing the suspension of logos was a common theme. Communication was not associated with a signified, echoing the experience of fieldwork where observant participation and embodied experience stand at the foreground. Our work was not based on language, which remains the main tool of academic education. In fact, as noted by the French sociologist Dominique Memmi, Pierre Bourdieu approaches "the lettered inclination to disembodiment the world as social disposition: a disposition from those who have the freedom to distance themselves from urgency and necessity."(2009: 78).

Could these labs encourage our students to explore further the field of somatic practices as an additional toolbox? It seems to us that they were an opportunity to approach a few concepts through feelings and body sensations. Let's keep in mind that for the purpose of this essay, we restricted most of our references to French authors. Further discussion would require situating them within a much broader bibliography.

- **Embodiment.** A student noted that she felt uncomfortable with some of the exercises involving touch, which brought back some of her personal history. Conceptualized in particular by Marcel Mauss, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu, the notion of embodiment was directly experienced through various emotions like discomfort, ridicule, or on the contrary ease and pleasure. Some of the students realized how their body carries out social meaning and results from a process of socialization formed throughout childhood.

- Body scheme : Basic movements like massaging each other, embracing each other and giving weight involved the strength of acquired dispositions. This embodied experience enacts our ability to open up to others when picking and touching a partner and to give our trust when giving our weight. We were interrogating posture as the result of an entirely conscious process. Paul Schilder defines body scheme as "the picture of our own body that we form in our mind, that is to say the way in which the body appears to ourselves (...). The term indicates that we are not dealing with a mere sensation or imagination." (1968: 35).

- Gesture as feeling

Students referred to the gesture of embracing each other by the term "hug," which in France is strongly tied to an affectionate feeling (and is not used as a greeting practice). This spontaneous association between gesture and feeling gives substance to the idea that our emotions are socially informed, that social interactions of everyday life involve specific gestures and situate themselves within a "social ritualization of communication." (Le Breton, 1998: 37). At times, students expressed their emotions ("I liked the feeling of his/her body heat against me," "the contact of our chests made me uncomfortable"). Some other times, they skipped this description, giving an analytical view of the situation ("it was very intimate"; "I realized differences in our bodies"). The distinction between these two phases (perception/analysis) was not obvious to them. Experiencing through basic exercises how emotions inform social interactions led to question the idea of objectivity and to bring awareness to internalized habits of movements, sensations and emotions.

- Inhibition

As one of F. M. Alexander's foundational concepts, inhibition is a way to release our biased patterns of moves and perceptions. Practicing inhibition with Matthieu Gaudeau through the exercise of receiving an object thrown at us enabled us to broaden the scope of our vision and to suspend the objective analysis of the situation (in terms of threat, object, distance, reaction). Matthieu made us experiment what Hubert Godart named "blind gaze": a sub-cortical, spatial sight against an objective sight, extending this sensory dissociation, this double movement, to other senses. Here lies the ability to both touch and be touched. Which in the case of hearing involves first being touched by the sound (of speech, or of an instrument) and its vibrations on our bones before paying attention to its meaning and interpretation.

This extension of the notion of perception can be helpful as field research method. It breaks with normalized interpretative schemes. It opens up states of consciousness or simply states of presence and receptivity in which can be situated new motivations. By putting rational projections in the background, it focuses the attention on what actually happens.

- Synchronization

One of the various techniques of induction used in hypnosis is synchronization. The limit of this lab was that we were exposed to a single rehearsal that was the result of a considerable amount of work and collaboration. Yet this technique is critical in order to tune up the bodies of the therapist and the client. This process can be achieved through the adjustment of body movements, of the sound or the flow of speech, which the therapist learns to modify intentionally, for example to match the respiratory rate of the

client. Guillaume emphasized this process of synchronization that is a given in his relation with Dina, an unfailing support to the reorientation of his attention that benefits his learning skills and as a result, his ability to perform. His goal is to extend this synchronization to the audience as a modality of communication.

Food for thought...

What lesson can we learn from these experimental labs within the classroom?

Reflexivity is central to the approach of somatic practitioners. For many of them ([F. M. Alexander](#), F. Delsarte, [Feldenkrais](#)) the development of their practice and theoretical reflection originated from their own wounds. This dialectic between practice and theory is particularly obvious in Hubert Godard's itinerary, and acts as a driving force in the collaboration between artists and researchers. Hybrid research projects provide a rich opportunity for engaging in reflexivity and renewed field methods. Our hope is that this approach through embodied experience and practice can broaden the perspective of our graduate students, if only through a taste of research fields often unknown of them.

As several ethnomusicologists have noted, learning and understanding music involves not only the act of observing and collecting but also experiencing. In fact, Jeff Todd Titon, argues for “an epistemology of fieldwork based in musical, rather than linguistic, being-in-the-world » and asks « what it is like for a person (including ourselves) to make and to know music as lived experience » (2008 : 38 ; 25). The development of [Emile Dalcroze](#) pedagogy is one example of this approach in the realm of music education. Exploring somatics as a possible resource for exploring lived, embodied experience of music – either by playing, dancing, or through any other modality of participation - contributes to this discussion on field methods in the anthropology of music and dance. However, the different nature of embodied experience between dancers and musicians would require further investigation.

As for the reception of our labs, despite the unusual and peculiar experience in which the students were asked to participate, they stroke us as very engaged. Although they did not express their reservations or frustrations for obvious reasons, they definitely shared interesting feedback. Of course, the phenomenological perspective of fieldwork is not restricted to the anthropology of music and dance. Feelings, sensations and more broadly the involvement of the body act as a medium for understanding the social worlds we study, regardless of the object of research.

Attempting to reflect on these experiences only reaffirmed the uncertainties of our approach and its experimental nature. We definitely feel like we only scratched the surface. Our impression is that we have been either too ambitious theoretically, covering too many notions within one lab, or too cautious practically, dedicating insufficient time to our labs.

Initiating students within the classroom to the suspension of interpretation by focusing on body sensations and [proprioception](#) (the perception of movement) does not mean that we were necessarily able to demonstrate the heuristic value of this process. However, we hope it expanded their representation of ethnographic methods through bodily modes of learning. We strongly believe that the links between field methods in the anthropology of music and dance and somatic practices are worth exploring.

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