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## Introduction

Christine Vial Kayser

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This book analyses the dynamic relationship between art and subjective consciousness, following a phenomenological, pragmatist and enactive approach. It brings out a new approach to the role of the body in art, not as a speculative object or symbolic material but as the living source of the imaginary. It contains theoretical contributions and case studies taken from various artistic practices (visual art, theatre, literature and music), Western and Eastern, the latter concerning China, India and Japan.

These contributions allow us to nourish the debate on embodied cognition and aesthetics, using theory—philosophy, art history, neuroscience—and the authors' personal experience as artists or spectators. According to the Husserlian method of "reduction" and pragmatist introspection, they postulate that listening to bodily sensations—cramps, heartbeats, impulsive movements, eye orientation—can unravel the thread of subconscious experience, both active and affective, that emerge in the encounter between a subject and an artwork, an encounter which, following John Dewey, we deem to be a case study for life in general.

Ce livre analyse la relation dynamique entre l'art et la conscience subjective, selon une approche phénoménologique, pragmatiste et enactive. Il vise à faire émerger une nouvelle approche du rôle du corps dans l'art, non pas comme objet spéculatif ou matériau symbolique, mais comme source vivante de l'imaginaire. Les contributions théoriques et les études de cas sont prises à diverses pratiques artistiques (arts visuels, théâtre, littérature et musique), occidentales et orientales, ces dernières concernant la Chine, l'Inde et le Japon.

Selon la méthode husserlienne de « réduction », en écho à l'introspection pragmatiste, les textes témoignent que l'écoute des sensations corporelles – crampes, battements de cœur, mouvements pulsionnels, orientation des yeux – mises en jeu par l'œuvre, permet de dénouer le fil de l'expérience inconsciente, à la fois kinesthésique et affective, qui émerge dans la rencontre entre un sujet et une œuvre d'art, une rencontre comprise, à la manière de Dewey, comme un cas d'école de la vie en général.

**Christine Vial Kayser** (PhD, HDR) is an art historian and museum curator (emeritus). She is an Associate researcher with Héritages (CYU) and a member of the Doctoral School 628 - AHSS. Her research relates to the capacity of art to transform representations within an individual and in the collective mind, through embodied, mnemonic, and affective processes, in a global, comparative (East/west context). She works at the crossroads of art theory, anthropology, and neuroaesthetics.

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L'ART COMME EXPERIENCE DU CORPS VIVANT un dialogue Orient/Occident

Edited by / Édité par Christine Vial Kayser

**VERNON PRESS**

Edited by / Édité par **Christine Vial Kayser**

# ART AS EXPERIENCE OF THE LIVING BODY

an East/West dialogue

# L'ART COMME EXPERIENCE DU CORPS VIVANT

un dialogue Orient/Occident



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# ART AS EXPERIENCE OF THE LIVING BODY

AN EAST/WEST DIALOGUE

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# L'ART COMME EXPERIENCE DU CORPS VIVANT

UN DIALOGUE ORIENT/OCCIDENT

Edited by/ Sous la direction de

**Christine Vial Kayser**



Bridging Languages and Scholarship

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*L'importance des métaphores à sous bassement corporel et sensori-moteur devrait nous alerter : le corps est le référent ultime de toute opération sémiotique et l'opérateur de la semiosis. (Jacques Fontanille (2004). Soma & séma : figures du corps. Maisonneuve & Larose, p. 135)*

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*The importance of metaphors with a corporeal and sensory-motor underpinning should alert us: the body is the ultimate referent of any semiotic operation and the operator of semiosis. (Ibid., editor's translation)*



# Contents / Table des matières

List of figures and table / Liste des figures et tableau

xi

**ART AS EXPERIENCE OF THE LIVING BODY**

xxiii

AN EAST/WEST DIALOGUE

**Editor's introduction**

xxv

Christine Vial Kayser

*Héritages UMR9022 (CNRS, Cergy Paris University), France*

**Part I: Theoretical framework**

1

Chapter I.1

**Conceptual frame and methodology**

3

Christine Vial Kayser

*Héritages UMR9022 (CNRS, Cergy Paris University), France*

Chapter I.2

**The 'participant's body in aesthetic experience and 'sense-making enactivism'**

31

Alice Dupas

*École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, France*

Chapter I.3

**The body as a phenomenological site of (non)being in the art of *Zen/Gen***

53

Aya Kamperis

*CARU (Contemporary Arts ReSearch Unit)*

Chapter I.4

***Kata* and *katachi* in Japanese philosophy**

75

Tetsuya Kono

*Rikkyo University, Tokyo, Japan*

**Part II: The living body as a mirror between inner and outer self:  
A liberating strategy**

95

Chapter II.1

**The living body as an elsewhere**

97

Alaner İmamoğlu

*Eskisehir Osmangazi University, Turkey*

Chapter II.2

**“We are in the midst of reality responding with joy”: The paintings  
of Agnes Martin and attuning to the living body**

115

Simon Morley

*Dankook University, South Korea*

Chapter II.3

**Acting bodies: Aesthetic and therapeutic agency within a cinematic  
dispositive**

137

Anna Chiara Sabatino

*University of Salerno, Italy*

**Part III: The living body in performance as an integrative gaze**

155

Chapter III.1

**Zeami’s concept of *riken no ken* or the birth of the transcendental  
subject**

157

Tetsuya Kono

*Rikkyo University, Tokyo, Japan*

Chapter III.2

**Enacting affectivity: The psychophysical training of *śrṅgāra* in  
Gopal Venu’s *Navarasa Sādhana***

179

Giorgia Ciampi

*University of Exeter*

Giovanna Colombetti

*University of Exeter*

Chapter III.3

**Drag portraiture and socio-political lived bodies in Alexander  
Apóstol’s *Régimen: Dramatis Personae***

207

Gustavo E. Subero

*Imperial College London*



**Part IV: Art as relationship between body, self, space and matter** 231

Chapter IV.1

**On being moved: Experiencing art and architecture as an invitation to corporeal resonance** 233

Katarina Voigt

*TUM School of Engineering and Design, Munich, Germany*

Chapter IV.2

**Embodying the photographic image: Charles Marville's *Old Paris* and *New Paris* series** 259

Lauren S. Weingarden

*Florida State University*

Matthew Pelowski

*Vienna Cognitive Science Hub, Austria*

Corinna Kühnapfel

*University of Vienna, Austria*

Chapter IV.3

**Living is a performance (and vice versa)** 291

Pascale Weber

*Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University (School of Arts), France*

Chapter IV.4

**The soul at fingertips** 319

Zélia Chueke

*Universidade Federal do Paraná, Curitiba, Brazil*

**List of contributors** 343

**Index (personal names)** 347

**Index (concepts)** 351

# L'ART COMME EXPERIENCE DU CORPS VIVANT

## UN DIALOGUE ORIENT/ OCCIDENT

### **Introduction**

Christine Vial Kayser

*Héritages UMR9022 (CNRS, Cergy Paris University), France*

355

357

### **Partie I : Cadre théorique**

369

Chapitre I.1

#### **Cadre théorique et méthodologique**

371

Christine Vial Kayser

*Héritages UMR9022 (CNRS, Cergy Paris University), France*

Chapitre I.2

#### **Le corps du « participant » dans la réponse esthétique et l'énactivisme *sense-making***

403

Alice Dupas

*École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, France*

Chapitre I.3

#### **Le corps comme lieu phénoménologique de la production du (non)être dans l'art zen/*Gen***

427

Aya Kamperis

*CARU (Contemporary Arts ReSearch Unit)*

Chapitre I.4

#### ***Kata* et *katachi* dans la philosophie japonaise**

453

Tetsuya Kono

*Rikkyo University, Tokyo, Japon*

### **Partie II : Le corps vivant comme un miroir entre intérieur et extérieur : une stratégie libératrice**

475

Chapitre II.1

#### **Le corps vivant comme un ailleurs**

477

Alaner İmamoğlu

*Eskisehir Osmangazi University, Turquie*

Chapitre II.2

« Nous sommes au coeur de la réalité et y répondons avec joie ».

**Les peintures d'Agnes Martin et l'harmonie avec le corps vivant**

497

Simon Morley

*Dankook University, Corée du Sud*

Chapitre II.3

**Le corps acteur : agentivité esthétique et thérapeutique au sein d'un dispositif cinématographique**

523

Anna Chiara Sabatino

*Université de Salerne, Italie*

**Partie III : Le corps vivant dans la performance : un tremplin pour un regard intégrateur**

541

Chapitre III.1

**Le concept de *riken no ken* de Zeami ou la naissance du sujet transcendantal**

543

Tetsuya Kono

*Rikkyo University, Tokyo, Japon*

Chapitre III.2

**La mise en acte de l'affectivité : la formation psychophysique au *śṛṅgāra* dans le *Navarasa Sādhana* de Gopal Venu**

567

Giorgia Ciampi

*University of Exeter*

Giovanna Colombetti

*University of Exeter*

Chapitre III.3

**Alexander Apóstol *Régimen* : *Dramatis Personae*. Portraits de drags, corps vécu et sociopolitique**

597

Gustavo E. Subero

*Imperial College London*

**Partie IV : L'art comme relation entre le corps, soi, l'espace et la matière**

625

Chapitre IV.1

**Être (é)mû : vivre l'art et l'architecture comme une invitation à la résonance corporelle**

Katarina Voigt

*TUM School of Engineering and Design, Munich, Allemagne*

627

Chapitre IV.2

**Incarner l'image photographique : la série du *Vieux Paris* et du *Nouveau Paris* de Charles Marville**

Lauren S. Weingarden

*Florida State University*

Matthew Pelowski

*Vienna Cognitive Science Hub, Autriche*

Corinna Kühnapfel

*University of Vienna, Autriche*

657

Chapitre IV.3

**Vivre est une performance (et réciproquement)**

Pascale Weber

*Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (École des arts), France*

691

Chapitre IV.4

**L'âme au bout des doigts**

Zélia Chueke

*Universidade Federal do Paraná, Curitiba, Brésil*

719

**Liste des auteurs**

745

**Index des noms propres**

749

**Index des noms communs**

753

# Editor's introduction

Christine Vial Kayser

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This book is part of my research on the dynamic relationship between art and subjective consciousness, founded in particular on new phenomenology and neuroscience in a comparative perspective between East and West. It follows a seminar (Vial Kayser, 2018–19) in which several of the current contributors of this book participated. As already proposed in *Installation art as an experience of self in space and time* (Vial Kayser & Coëllier, 2021), it aims to bring out a new approach to the role of the body in art, not as a speculative object or symbolic material but as the living source of the imaginary. It contains theoretical contributions and case studies taken from various artistic practices (visual art, theatre, literature and music), Western and Eastern, the latter concerning China, India and Japan. These multiple views intersect, allowing us to enlighten and nourish the debate on embodied cognition and aesthetics, using theory—philosophy, art history, neuroscience—and the authors' personal experience as artists or spectators.

The theoretical premisses are the pragmatist/phenomenological/enactive postulate that human beings are ontologically “living in the world” in a dynamic flow of experience. The body is central to this encounter, its conditions and form:

The body is the storm centre, the origin of co-ordinates, the constant place of stress in all that experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view. (...) The world experienced (otherwise called the ‘field of consciousness’) comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest.” (James, 1912/2010, p. 189, note 98).

For John Dewey, the basic fact of human life is “that man uses the materials and energies of nature with intent to expand his life, and (...) does so in accord with the structure of his organism—brain, sense organs, and muscular system” (1934/2005, Ch. 2, p. 26). It follows that to understand the mechanism of human consciousness and the origin of all mental representations (symbols, concepts, language), one needs to pay attention to the living body's data; to the sensuous, visceral, kinaesthetic, and affective cues, i.e. the “organic and psychophysical activities [which] supply mind with its footing and connection in nature; they provide meaning with their existential

stuff.” (Ibid., 1925/2008, p. 220). For James, intellectualist, dualist, and mentalist constructs such as Cartesian philosophy, Kantian aesthetics and cognitive science are “forever inadequate to the fulness of the reality to be known” (1911, p. 78). James thus distinguishes between direct “acquaintance” with something through sensation and perception, and “thought” of something (1918/2018, vol. II, Ch. XVIII, p. 2). Direct acquaintance conveys a *felt* quality to the experience, impossible to construct mentally.

Dewey ascribes to art, in the general sense of an object devoid of immediate practical use, the capacity to enlighten us about this phenomenon. Art is “the act of production [of] an experience in which the whole creature is alive” (1934/2005, Ch. 2, p. 27). This is why it is called an art “work”. Work means “making”. It implies action and energy; thus, the “aesthetic effect is due to art’s unique transcript of the energy of the things of the world” (Ibid., Ch. 8, p. 184; eBook, p. 185).

Husserlian phenomenology also claims that perception of the world results from the interaction between the living/organic body and consciousness, within what he called the “lived body”. Phenomenology attempts to seize this encounter through the method of “reduction” and *epochè*.

This book emphasises the “living body” over the “lived body”. The method of reduction shows, echoing pragmatist introspection, that by listening to bodily sensations—cramps, heartbeats, impulsive movements, eye orientation—we can unravel the thread of subconscious experience, both active and affective, that emerges in the encounter of a subject and the world, as between a subject and an artwork. We shall explain (Ch.1.1 and Ch. 1.2) the theoretical context of such an approach which, following James and Dewey’s insights, includes enactive philosophy in its affective dimension (Colombetti, 2014, Introduction, § 5, eBook).

We purport to use this theoretical frame to examine how art may be conducive to an understanding of our consciousness as “grounded” in the sensuous, material and affective interaction with objects, people, and spaces; how art may help us to retune to our living body, recover our vital energy, in the sense of somatic energy (body impulse), biological energy and psychological energy. This book also examines the affective component of the aesthetic experience, how it feeds on emotional, kinaesthetic and situated memory, to give rise to sensations of pleasure and displeasure.

Dewey posits an equivalence between “art” and “life” experience, one permitting access to the other, but he does not explain how. The object of this book is to decipher this link, testing the hypothesis proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, but also by Alva Noë and Asian aesthetics, that art is a “game”, a “play” in which the mechanisms involved in daily life (such as focussing on significant details) are replaced by a

more global, detached form of evaluation, allowing us to understand the structures of our engagement with the world. Art, in this view, has a reflective value, that of unravelling bundles of affects and experiences. It answers the question asked by pragmatist philosopher Carl Lewis, “what is the value of this presented object as an enduring matrix of experience” (Lewis, 1929/1956, p. 405). Some have proposed that aesthetic experience uses the *Default Mode Network* as do daydreaming and meditation (Brincker, 2015, p. 133, Vessel et al., 2019, online). This may account for art’s “defamiliarising/refamiliarising” effect (Scarlinzi 2015, p. 263), by which art challenges our *habitus*, i.e. the embodied habits of thinking and acting which aim is social adaptability and efficiency (Bourdieu, 1997, pp. 91–93).

Last, contrary to pragmatism’s focus on action as a search for a monadic individual survival, we also want to consider the role of art in reconnecting us with our collective, social, or cosmic being, with our “non-being”, with our core energetic being, our *qi*. This is an essential dimension of Eastern aesthetics in particular, which views art as a means to bring out the “body-mind” coupling, which we tend to forget (Yuasa, 1993, p. 26). Even beyond the body-mind coupling, Eastern philosophy searches for an interval “between body and mind” from which arises that elusive “in-between” or *metaxu* (Jullien, 2006, Ch. VIII, p. 86), which Aristotelian philosophy did not admit.

This book therefore proposes a dialogue between East and West through chapters that deal directly with the body-mind in India, China and Japan. It also highlights the intellectual exchanges that led to this encounter between two traditions (between enactive theory and Buddhism, between new Japanese philosophy, pragmatism and phenomenology, between Western artists and Zen, between Indian and Western theatre). Thus, the chapters are not classified by cultural area but according to the modalities of the body-mind dynamic in different art forms.

I shall now explain the organisation of the book in four parts, indicate the main issues addressed by each chapter, and show the coherence of the whole.

## Chapters organisation and main ideas

**The first part, *Theoretical framework***, contains four chapters: the first two are devoted to the Western concepts that explain the central role given to the body in our aesthetic approach.

My text, “Conceptual frame and methodology” (Vial Kayser, Ch. I.1), following my introduction, dwells on the concepts developed by phenomenology and pragmatism that give precedence to experience over reflection, to sensory, kinaesthetic engagement with matter and environment, guided by a fundamental principle, the expansion of life. I emphasise how much this anti-Cartesian, revolution owes to the

proximity between philosophy and psychology at the end of the twentieth century; I evoke the debates that have animated psychology since the 1970s, between the proponents of a computational approach to consciousness, and those who, like Lawrence Barsalou, assert that consciousness is an interactive process, based on the modal and affective analysis of a situation, also called a *quale*, with our well-being as the horizon. This concept of situated and affective consciousness enlightens the role of form already proposed by Aby Warburg, with an (en)active rather than psychological and culturally situated manner. It provides the framework for this book proposal of an aesthetics of the living body. It sheds a new light on conceptual works such as those of Lawrence Weiner and Lucio Fontana, which appear no longer as systems of signs but as experiences of resistance and energy, of self and space.

From phenomenology and pragmatism emerged the enactive theory which Alice Dupas uses in “The ‘participant’s body in aesthetic experience and ‘sense-making enactivism’” (Ch. I.2), to understand participatory artworks. She points out that, following this theory, all interaction with the world is an active engagement motivated by the will to sustain one’s life. In this sense, any form of art engages this same process of interactive search for the meaning of the object, involving back-and-forth appraisal, cognitive loops (feedback loop) between body and consciousness, experience and memory, where subjectivity is manifested by the directional attention projected on the environment.

The following two chapters provide an overview of the concepts developed by traditional and contemporary Japanese philosophy as applied to the arts. They reveal the philosophical proximities between phenomenology and Japanese philosophy in which Zen Buddhism plays a key role, and which led to exchanges between philosophers and artists of the two regions during the twentieth century.

Aya Kamperis, “The body as a phenomenological site of (non)being in the art of *Zen/Gen*” (Ch. I.3), reminds us that in Japanese, the term *ningen*, which refers to the human being, is composed of two characters: 人 *Nin*—person—and 間 *Gen*, which means “interval” (the kanji shows the sun appearing between two doors). According to Japanese philosophy (of Watsuji in particular), the human being is indeed a “composite reality”, fundamentally “in-between” that emerges from an interstitial space, between the individual and the collective, between the psychic and the physical, between the past and the present. Like the draught between two doors, this emergence is dynamic, in flux. The arts, notably those influenced by Zen, allow us to practice this awareness of our ontological “non-being”, and of our belonging to the “totality”, the “Ta”. This chapter announces others in this book such as chapter II.2 on Agnes Martin, which also used Zen to find a way to escape Cartesian binarism and to attain a state of “non-being”, experienced as plenitude. Katharina Voigt (Ch. IV.1) refers to the character of in-betweenness of the experience of art (in-between matter and space) and how the sense of self emerges from it.



Tetsuya Kono's "Kata and *katachi* in Japanese philosophy" (Ch. I.4), contrasts the technical concept of *kata* (型), which underlies martial arts and Noh theatre (能), with that of *katachi* (形) of philosopher Kiyoshi Miki. Technical gestures are codified by *kata* (型), yet they must be open to the dynamic process of life, according to the principle of *katachi* (形). Bodily technique in the arts thus leads to the expansion of the subject, even to its transmutation. The subject extends towards the environment by forming a man-tool unit of which the organic body is the medium. Like Aya Kamperis, Pr. Kono establishes a link between the Japanese philosophy of technic and Don Ihde's postphenomenological understanding of the experience of the coupling of the self with a tool or a technique, as moving and malleable.

**The second part, *The living body as a mirror between inside and outside: A liberating strategy***, focuses on artworks that involve exchanges between the artist's inner and outer space, between subject and environment. The three chapters are concerned with distinct art forms (literature, painting, cinema) but have in common to consider the artwork to be a phenomenological mirror, at the tangency between the subject (the artist, the viewer) and the world. This mirror allows the subject, disconnected from the body for cultural or pathological reasons, to relocate itself in a collective space, with others, freed from the anguish of the separation between self and world.

Alaner İmamoğlu, "The living body as an elsewhere" (Ch. II.1), uses Turkish author Aslı Erdoğan's novelistic travelogue, *The city in crimson cloak*, 2007, to develop a reflection on the agency of the living body, driven by a search of pleasure and "joy" at the risk of death. It poses the living body as a "body-subject", which forces the lived body or "subject-body" to assert itself outside its cultural and social references. The journey, a social and cultural state of "in-betweenness" not unlike the concept of Gen, explored in Chapter I.3, allows the protagonist to break the chrysalis of the social body formed by language. This happens by projecting antagonistic forces on the surface of the novel, on the paper, that acts as a mirror: the living body yearning for a liberated sexuality and the subject-body of the author, locked in the prohibitions of the flesh imposed by the Islamic law. By disorienting it, the living body gives the subject new horizons. The format of the narrative itself favours the maieutic of this new self.

Simon Morley's chapter, "'We are in the midst of reality responding with joy': The paintings of Agnes Martin and attuning to the living body" (Ch. II.2), is concerned with the relationship to landscape of Agnes Martin's paintings (1912-2004), which are like an "inner landscape". If the artist, educated in a Protestant and Platonic framework, seeks purity through the overcoming of the physical body, the anguish provoked by schizophrenia finds an outcome in another tradition, pragmatism—which admits the essential link between the subject and the body—and in Zen. This

allows her to reach intuitively the plenitude of non-being, as a sublimated subject flying with and beyond her body, fused in the landscape, in the double sense of being “in the middle” and immersed in the totality, the “*Ta*”, also evoked in Ch. I.3.

Chapter II.3 examines the process of going out of oneself to see oneself among others for curative purposes. “Acting bodies: Aesthetic and therapeutic agency in a cinematographic dispositive”, Anna Chiara Sabatino presents her experience with autistic children in a project of self-narration through the camera, which she directed in a hospital. She shows that the physical body, the support of the self-image, when seen by the subject in the reflection of a camera, relocates the subject in the shared collective space, through reciprocal gazes. Through the filmic process, the self is seen under the gaze of others, and “as another”. The subject’s sense of self emerges in this in-between. The body, through its essential function of carrying the self, returns the subject to the intersubjectivity that characterises it. Her analysis is based on Vivian Sobchack’s insistence that the experience of watching a film is “corporeal” and on Vittorio Gallese’s views on the audio-visual experience as “detached reality”, seen from a distance. She concurs with Eugene Gendlin (1992) on the “primacy of the body” in the perception of the environment and of the image.

**The third part, *The living body in performance as an integrative gaze*** deals with the capacity of Japanese and Indian theatre, as well as performative photography to reveal the intersubjective structures of the experience of self. The performer’s body is seized by the audience’s gaze and manifested as a collective “body-mind”.

Tetsuya Kono’s “Zeami’s concept of *riken no ken* or the birth of the transcendental subject” (Ch. III.1) presents the Japanese concept of *riken no ken* (離見の見), which means “the view from afar”. For Noh master Zeami, it is a method for the (mostly male) actor to put himself in the place of the spectators and to understand how they perceive his presence as a character on stage. He does this through his body, which, like a mirror endowed with magnetism, attracts the gaze of the spectators who concentrate literally “on his back”, as a physical sensation. Then, the actor feels both on stage (in his character) and in the stands, watching the play. He can judge the emotional response of the audience to his performance and thus embody, at best, his character as an intersubjective being, an in-between. This mirrored gaze induced by the artistic play/game is somewhat similar to that of looking at oneself “as another” using the camera, discussed by Chiara Sabatino (Ch. II.3), and to the concept of an “in-between” subject (between the individual and the collective) presented in Chapter I. 3.

Chapter III.2, “Enacting affectivity: The psychophysical training of *śṛṅgāra* in Gopal Venu” *Navarasa Sādhanā*, by Giorgia Ciampi, Giovanna Colombetti, is dedicated to a technique of actor training in India, a country whose complex philosophy gives both pre-eminence to the word and to sight, while considering, in yoga in particular,

the body to be a carrier of energies that must be captured and transformed into spiritual powers. This text, which combines the lived experience of Giorgia Ciampi and the theoretical contribution of Giovanna Colombetti, illustrates the capacity of art to advance our understanding of human embodiment, in terms of the direct experience of the living body, with its associated feelings of vital energy and affective dynamics. This training, which aims, like the Zen arts mentioned above, to refine the sensitivity of both actor and audience to the link between body, emotions and being, bears witness to the fact that in Indian thought, spirituality does not evacuate the bodily, the sensory, but retains it in the form of invisible material, the energy (*prāna*) that animates the world, created by the great divine “play” (*līlā*). In its description of how to bring about the “lotus flower” by eliciting joy into oneself through the inner smile, this chapter also echoes Kono’s text on Zeami.

In the following chapter, Gustavo E. Subero considers the “Drag portraiture and socio-political lived bodies in Alexander Apóstol’s *Régimen: Dramatis Personae* (Ch. III.3). This chapter leads us, through the dissonant photographs of Venezuelan political figures as characters in a play, to question the function of the official portrait and specifically, the role of the living, gendered body. While the characters invested with authority by their political function—here within the dictatorial regime of Nicolás Maduro—usually dominate the viewer by their gaze, virile physical presence, accompanied by the symbols of power (medals, uniforms), Alexander Apóstol uses a reverse strategy. He stages drag queens embodying victims of this dictatorship; political victims—*The democrat on trial*, *The imprisoned adversary thrown into the void*—or victims by ignorance—*The beauty queen*. Their status as victims is indicated by the title and reinforced by their bodies bearing signs of insignificance and awkwardness: a faded suit with too-short sleeves, marks of tanning, a crooked crown, fleeing eyes, scars give to the character sitting in front of a table the appearance of a prisoner subjected to the authority of the State. The text implicitly shows that the social subject is constructed through an inverted gaze, as in a mirror between oneself and others, of which the body is the support, as suggested in the principles of Noh theatre. The text extends our understanding of the role of the body as a medium of the intersubjective gaze, taken from phenomenology. It also complexifies and materialises the concepts of living and lived body. Here, the living (sexual) body is not a subject but an object, manipulated by the lived body (caught between two genders) and appears closer to the Husserlian *Körper*, the physical body modified by transgender operations.

**Part IV, *Art as relationship between the body, self, space and matter***, explores the body’s resonance with patterns and materials. It shows how art produces a dynamic encounter between these three entities, allowing a sensory situating of the subject in the physical, cultural, and intersubjective space through the organic body.

In Chapter IV.1, “On being moved: Experiencing art and architecture as an invitation to corporeal resonance”, Katharina Voigt uses Siri Hustvedt’s hypothesis of “embodied vision” and Hartmut Rosa’s concept of “resonance”, to explore her perception of Joseph Beuys’ *Olivestone* in the Zurich Art museum, as an interplay of volumes, space, stones and smells. She shows that the strength of the installation triggers the viewer’s physical movement within it and then his or her “being moved” emotionally, suggesting that this sequential relation is a causal relationship. This hypothesis, which is similar to that of William James (Ch. I.1), is shared throughout this book. Using a form of kinaesthetic introspection, the author, as a viewer, pays close attention to the sensations aroused by the work, and how they resonate in her, in an affective manner. Being both an architect and a dancer, the author then shows conversely that watching dancers move within an architectural complex triggers an embodied perception of the buildings, in which a sense of a collective self also emerges.

In chapter IV.2, “Embodying the photographic image: Charles Marville’s *Old Paris* and *New Paris* series”, Lauren S. Weingarden, Matthew Pelowski and Corinna Kühnapfel, offer a dual methodological approach to the bodily and affective engagement of the viewer of photographs of pre- and post-Haussmannian Paris: an art historical approach, followed by a psycho-empirical analysis. This chapter examines whether and how the photographic image triggers associative affects that influence the viewer’s propensity to engage within the open or closed, dark or light space presented by the image. The analysis shows that the aesthetic judgement stems from the virtual engagement of the body in the urban space presented by the photograph, and the projection of mnemonic affects. However, this judgement is largely determined by the affordances of the image, what it invites the body to do, and by the cultural relationship of the viewer to urban life.

In chapter IV.3, “Living is a performance”, Pascale Weber posits that our imagination is haunted by our animal past. She thus echoes Dewey’s hypothesis that our intentions come from our animal heritage (1934/2005, Ch. 2, p. 25, eBook, p. 26) and that we are mistaken in believing that animals imitate us. It is the other way around, says Dewey, and art “is the concrete proof that man uses the materials and energies of nature for the purpose of increasing his life” (Ibid.). The performance intends to bring to the surface these memories buried in the body and masked by the *habitus* this psychic and kinaesthetic state that formats perception with cultural dispositions (Bourdieu, 1997). Through touch, the artist aspires to bring up forgotten physicalities and suggests that imagination allows us to travel in parallel bodily dimensions.

Zelia Chueke's chapter IV.4, "The soul at the fingertips", posits the "entanglement" or "enmeshment" of soul (by which she means the affective mind) and body in the experience of the pianist's gestures. The author draws on Aristotelian philosophy and Husserlian phenomenology, to explore the production of the art object as a dialogue between body and imagination. Yet, contrary to all texts in this book, she posits a transcendental view of the self, immune from the environment. The subject-body "coupling" which she discusses is kinaesthetic. By showing that the harmony between gesture and sound is produced by the implicit perception of the relationship between the finger / the arm / the imagination and the piano key, this chapter nevertheless refers to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's theory of touching and being touched in both a kinaesthetic and affective loop. The memory grounded in kinaesthetic experience allows the audience (by listening only) to perceive the restraint of the finger or, on the contrary, its energetic strike, and to project on this gesture the ductile experience, the inner rhythms experienced in other arts (such as sculpture), and in daily life.

## **Conclusion**

These various chapters testify to a belief shared between the authors and between Asia and the West, of an ontological, dynamic and iterative link between the organic body and the subjective consciousness that art reveals, in a holistic way. The texts on Japan also bring in the notion of "in-betweenness", of an existence that is neither only corporeal nor conscious, neither flesh nor affect, where something happens (e.g. "the flower" in Noh) that contains and manifests this quality of wholeness. This moment, which is not thought of by Western philosophy, except in the aesthetics of "grace" (Billeter, 2010, Ch. V, p. 2), is also expressed in India in the gesture of the lotus flower, explained in chapter III. 3. We hope to show that visual art, music, dance, performance, but also literature, in the process of linking the artist, the work and the audience, heighten our attention to the process of everyday life experience which is also grounded in the sensorial and relies on constant exchanges with others and things, in order to remain "alive".

The ambition of this book is methodological. It aims to show the efficiency of a bodily aesthetic in the understanding of the work of art. It is also epistemological. It is part of a strategy in philosophy, in psychology (and neurosciences) in favour of understanding our cognitive relationship to the world, as "situated", caught in action, and thus both modal and conceptual, cognitive and affective.

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