

Performing beyond the self

Cara Tolmie / Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome / Moyra Davey



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I'm on my back on a soft play mat

My head is next to a student's feet

I have been gurgling for three minutes

Water sparks from my gob

I have spit on my face

I swallow some of it

I am a humming machine a churning

clucking apparatus my cheeks ache and

I feel violated in a mint green way

like I might at the hygienist

I sound so that I will not drown

choke, cough, splutter like a naff fountain

there's something joyous about this challenge

the debasement, on my back like a bug at work

This week I hosted two workshops for my Fine Art degree students, one focusing on Voice with [Cara Tolmie](#), one focusing on Movement with [Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome](#). I also attended a screening and reading group on [Moyra Davey's](#) work hosted by the [Feminist Duration Reading Group](#).

For those who don't know me, my work spreads flat against surfaces, it is image. It appears on paper, canvas, screens, flattened and aware of this flattening – it wriggles against it, bunching the meniscus. Below this surface is the stuff of life (the action, error, wear, and terror) of making. The movement. I've long had a pull towards embodiment – to workshops involving dance, song, listening and play. I learn *through* these situations but also explore the aesthetics *of* these situations – an aesthetics of embodied learning. Workshops exploring voice and movement give me a way to enter into a creative flow state and give me a refreshed perspective on the role of bodies as both makers and subjects of art works.

'vocal somaesthetics will be interested in the bodily sensations of what it feels like to vocalize and to listen to another person vocalizing'

Anne Tarvainen. Singing, Listening, Proprioceiving: Some Reflections on Vocal Somaesthetics, from publication Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics. (Brill, 2018)

In Tolmie's workshop I pick a torn fragment of paper from the floor. Unfolding it I read it to my partner. Here I discover the phrase 'somaesthetics' taken from research gathered by Tolmie towards her PHD. To digest this quote we discuss how it feels to vocalize. We interpret somaesthetics as an aesthetics of bodily sensation – exploring the qualities of how things feel, trusting that our bodies are cognisant, or (to bring in a quote from my own research) to believe that 'The body knows things about which the mind is ignorant.' *The Moving Body (Le Corps Poétique): Teaching Creative Theatre, 2013*

My partner and I think the trick to somaesthetics might be to focus on the inside of your own body when singing rather than remaining aware of how your voice sounds from the outside, of how it lands like a cold, disembodied artefact.

A couple of days later I post a 5 second video of students moving in Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome's workshop. I put a black and white filter on it. I don't know why. Perhaps it places a necessary veil between the students and the screen, or between the real (with its fractal distractions) and the unifying theme of collective movement. Monochrome limbs glide and echo, responding, shifting across a space. When I post this I feel a shard of shame, emanating from the need to represent the moment.

Fernanda and I had been dancing together in the workshop, she was leading the group and we were demonstrating her instructions as a pair.

fingers twinkle down a spine

that reads and responds

my hand on her sacrum, flat, she is bent over

I sympathise with the moment she had her hand on my sacrum,

it felt really good, like being held in space

the pressure releasing something

a memory of my sacrum being pushed out of shape

during pregnancy and the slow pulling in of tendons

afterwards

I have one hand on her skull and one on the base of her spine

she is on all fours and I am low and catering

she unfurls and I have her spine between my hands like a creature

contained like an accordion, although it's her spine that plays my hands

palms that follow and never force.

When we improvise together, guiding

I twirl around her toe and hold

I comb and flick an inner arm to the tips

I step back and witness, giving space

I realise I have not documented the workshop

my hair has been over my face

another convenient veil

I must step out of the moving body into the performing body

of the 'teacher'

I observe, take in, open my camera app and capture.

as I peel away to record Fernanda comes out of her dance

it ends.

The facilitating body: there are networks of expectations to stoke and supply. The welfare of others to underwrite, you must hold the bureaucracy of institutions in your own body, hold that and meld it into something human sized for each of your students. This metabolic work is fuelled by your own psychic energy, funded by the hours you sleep,

maintained by the calories you consume, and ballasted by the stabilizing care of others (the emotional shock absorbers).

At the beginning of Fernanda's workshop she circulated a book containing images of a skeleton walking through a landscape, anatomically correct etchings from the Enlightenment period. We held these pages with our own bony fingers, observing this structure with sympathy *and* disbelief.

In her video *Les Goddesses*, Moyra Davey takes books from a shelf by their spines, blowing dust off them one by one out of an open window. Davey's narration speaks of her Multiple Sclerosis and the homeopathic cures recommended for it (which also happen to be chemicals used to take and develop photographs). The body that makes and features in work is treated by the same chemicals that record it.

Embodiment, presentation, and performance of self, ricochet throughout the film splitting our attention and opening space for a porous kind of meaning making. A narration of Mary Wollstonecraft's life crunches on 80's monochrome photographs of Davey's sisters. There are images of bodies being sorted by a body. Davey's narrator figure slices the frame. Oblique and restless. We see her listening to her narration on headphones and repeating this out loud to a zoom recorder. In the reading group afterwards people disagree on whether this video is casually assembled or painstakingly self-aware, and what Davey's intentions may be regarding her act of self-performance. Does she perform like this as a way to actualise or to dissipate the self? Or perhaps her performance addresses the trickiness of achieving either of these states.

The recorded word and image memorialise and make narrative possible, yet the act of recording escorts being towards appearing. I think of the photos I took in the voice and movement workshops, of the way they ossify experience and fail to capture the sense of sounding and moving

from the perspective of the participant's body. The images lack a quality of somatic empathy and do not apologize for it.

At home, my 18-month-old stands in a baby bath, she bends down to pick up her yellow duck. I have one hand on the base of her back. My palm covers half her spine. This scale feels unbelievable. How can something so seemingly fixed as bone be so open to growth and change?



(Image: Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome during her workshop, photo and editing by Fay Nicolson)

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