Somatic Graphic: From music to drawing via the body

Introduction

Can engagement in embodied approaches to music education improve one's ability to draw? Are there transdisciplinary skills relevant to artists working with drawing or painting that can be developed through workshops in music or dance? Is there an argument for more subject generic curricula on the grounds that somatic training can be useful in any discipline that requires refined psychomotor skills?

In this article I use my own practice-based research to explore these questions. Like musical antiphony, I skip between the call of experiential moments of learning and the response of theoretical research. To situate my own experiences in wider contexts I draw from histories of creative pedagogy as well as current research in the fields of neuroscience; experimental psychology; art, music, and dance education.

My objective for this article is to describe specific instances of music training and explore how and why they may have affected my practice as a visual artist. I will speculate on why musical experience has augmented my understanding of visuospatial relationships and suggest possible implications for my future research and art pedagogy more widely.

'Artistic processes or products are essential components of and in artistic research. The choice of research methods is free and will vary with the research questions.' (Borgdorff 2012: 24). In line with Borgdorff I consider my creative outputs as valuable research in themselves that allow for multivalent theoretical perspectives. In this article I will *interpret* my practice through theory, which Borgdorff outlines as one valid approach. However, I want to acknowledge that neither theory nor practice are 'innocent' by accepting that 'All practices embody concepts, theories, and understandings' (the *immanent* perspective) (Berkdorff 2012: 19-21).

In using my own experience to explore embodied knowledge and trans-disciplinarity there is a need to employ appropriate methods of analysis and writing that acknowledge both my subjectivity and the difficulties of expressing the *embodied* in language. Therefore, I draw from Autoethnography, which 'considers personal experience as an important source of knowledge in and of itself, as well as a source of insight into cultural experience.' (Adams and Ellis 2014: 254) as well as Josephine Machon's definition of (Syn)aesthetics. (Syn)aesthetics defines both a method of performance and 'a heterogenous, playful and open theoretical device' (2009: 6).

> (Syn)aesthetic work shifts between performance disciplines, just as it shifts between the sensual and intellectual; the somatic, ('affecting the body' or 'absorbed through the body') and the semantic (the 'mental reading' of a sign).
> (Machon 2009: 4)

This interplay between the somatic and semantic, or sensing and cognition, is at the crux of my work as an artist and educator.

Play Sense

> We're students of Play Sense!
> Embodied geometry
> Physical forming
> Exercise! Exorcize!
>
> We draw through leaning,
> Learn through dreaming,
> Build through moving,
> Make through meaning.

This is an extract from my poem OVER AND OVER PURE FORM (2015) that later became a live performance (2016). This prosodic poem sets out the curriculum of a fictional art school, where students are physically instructed to perform the fundamental principles of an aesthetic education. By squeezing into 'points' and stretching into 'lines', they embody the ideologies of the pedagogy they are subjected to. The poem is split into three sections: studio exercises, critical studies, and assessment. I playfully and satirically draw from modernist pedagogies and blend them with elements of post-Coldstream criticality and contemporary neoliberal accountability.

Josef Albers' choreographic methods of teaching drawing at Black Mountain College was one reference. A digitized film shows Albers swooping his arm in circles and catalysing mass movement (Cohen 1955). Medium format photographs are as poised as theatrical tableaux, depicting students understanding angles by performing them, embodying geometry.

> To reject mechanical or habitual application is to promote inductive studies recognizing practice before theory, trial and error before insight. In short, we believe in learning by experience, which naturally lasts longer than anything learned by reading or hearing only.
> (Albers 1969: 13)

A distrust of language and the need to train the sensual faculties runs through Albers' writings. I felt Albers' methods at odds with my own experience of art education, which had revolved around the critique as 'the cornerstone of Western-based arts education' where 'Concepts, theories, and social critique were valued over craftmanship' (Armstrong and Doren 2023: xiii – 9). My BA had relegated tacit knowledge and focused on explicit knowledge; that which can be easily coded in language (Sennett 2008). Concepts were more valuable than skills, criticality rewarded over intuition. I had not questioned these values.

After undertaking a PGCE and MA I became interested in the ideologies that form, and are propagated though, arts pedagogies and the position bodies take within learning, particularly the ways bodies are conditioned and trained in schools and institutions. By moving the body beyond the confines of right angles (sitting at a desk, queuing in a corridor, navigating grids of tables) could we catalyse more critical modes of thinking: thinking that is active and aware of relationships and contexts; thinking that embodies agency? This led me to ask whether the embodied pedagogies central to modernism hold unexplored potential for the making and teaching of Fine Art today?

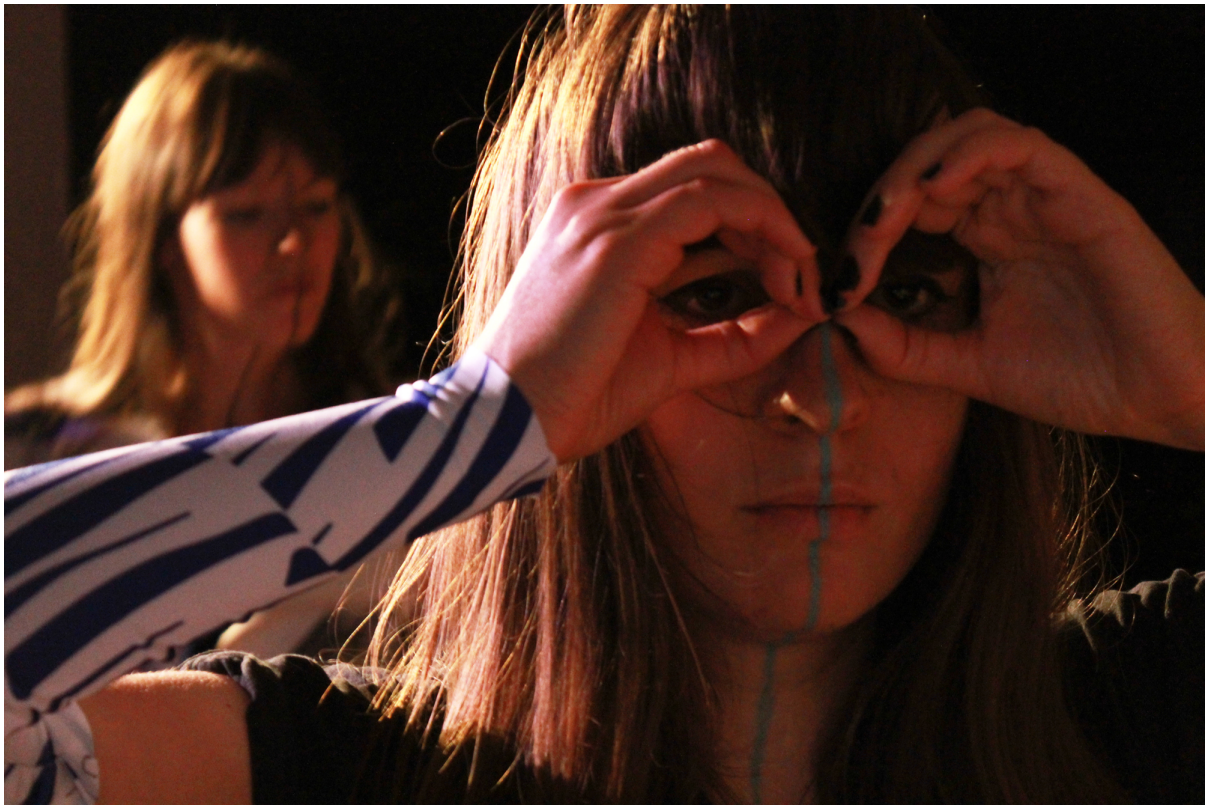

Figure 1: Fay Nicolson, Play Sense, 2016. Performance. 30 minutes. Kunstraum, London. Copyright Fay Nicolson.

Early Music Early Issues

Practical instruction was lacking from my Fine Art education but was the defining element of my independent music training. Between 2010-2020 I made numerous performances; these began as script-based works drawing from institutional critique and shifted towards physical theatre and experimental music the more I researched embodied learning. In 2016 I recorded a polyphonic song cycle called Spa Songs responding to different communities retreating to Bermondsey, London: the Cluniac Monks at Bermondsey Abbey (700–1540 AD) and the group of artists living and working in Butlers Wharf (1971-81) (London Borough of Southwark Libraries Department 1984, Langley, Pearce and Worth 2013). Harmonic intervals found in C13th motets filtered into the texture of my songs that, influenced by Derek Jarman, I recorded with DIY methods then later performed with a group of artists in the underground tunnel shaft of the Brunel Museum (2018).

Listening to early music encouraged me to question the ubiquity of Western musical systems. I learned that the 'precise performance of chant (was) a form of discipline and submission' (Jordan 1996: 66), the stave a protocol setting out acceptable modes of communication and performance. I also learned that definitions of harmonic consonance had changed throughout history, for example, Thirds and Sixths were dissonant until the Renaissance, whereas Fourths were considered consonant in the Middle Ages (Rosen 1975: 24-5).
I saw that musical relationships employed to elicit an effect (a minor chord to provoke melancholy) can feel essential but are in fact cultural constructions (Storr: 1997). This filtered into my composition process as I aimed to understand and play with the somatic and symbolic power of harmony, consonance, and dissonance. I drew from references in early music as well as contemporary pioneers of extended vocal technique and Deep Listening, Meredith Monk and Pauline Oliveros.

I used my intuitive knowledge of harmonic intervals (gained through attentive listening and informal training) to compose and record the song cycle. Yet, this knowledge was insufficient when it came to arranging and teaching the piece to performers. With no sight-reading skills or formal music education I decided to draw from (syn)aesthetic methods to realise this piece. Rather than employing someone to arrange and score the work, I wanted Spa Songs to contain a 'presence that ontologically resists and escapes those boundaries of codification and inscription as temporal arrest try to impose.' (Lepecki 2004: 127).

> I don't really see a separation with the voice and the body. They're one process. It's the breath coming up through the body and out.
> (Monk 2017: 2:16)

The contiguity of sound and movement in Monk's work appeals to my propensity for kinaesthetic learning. Through researching Monk's practice, I learned that she trained in a method of music education called Dalcroze.

Dalcroze

> Gesture must define musical emotion and call up its image.
> (Jaques-Dalcroze 1921: 207)

From 1901 Émile Jaques-Dalcroze began developing a novel approach to teaching music (known as Dalcroze) revolving around three central areas of study: Rhythmics; Ear Training (solfège); and Improvisation. Students of Dalcroze would also study 'Plastique Animèe', the physical interpretation of music through movement. Jaques-Dalcroze worked at the Hellerau Institute in Dresden, Germany between 1911–4 and 'had a significant impact on the Modernist movements in theatre and dance' (Davidson 2023: 134).

Andrew Davidson was one of my tutors for the Dalcroze Taster Day (March 2018) leading two sessions: 'What is Dalcroze Eurythmics?' and a practical session in 'Rhythmics'.
Davidson deftly summarises the core principles of Dalcroze:

> Rhythmics engages the whole body in the physical exploration of musical rhythm, melody, harmony, form […] Solfège is the study of pitch through ear training […] Exercises incorporate game-like qualities of vocal, visual, and kinaesthetic playfulness. Classes explore scales, intervals, and harmonic structures, toward the complexities of modulation, chromaticism, and atonality. Improvisation fosters musical communication in real time.
> (Davidson 2023: 134)

I buzzed with excitement drawing connections between modernist art and music education. The empirical testing privileged by Albers and the phenomenological explorations of shape, sound and movement by Oskar Schlemmer echo the pedagogical approaches of Dalcroze:

> We begin drawing lessons with general technical exercises: measuring, dividing, estimating; rhythms of measure and form, disposing, modifications of form. At the same time we use the motor sense as an important corrective.
> (Albers 1934: 4)

> Through practice using bodily involvement, one can learn to discriminate between even the subtlest nuances in all expressive qualities of sound.
> (Juntunen 2016: 144)

Through group work, moving, dancing, and listening I learned about fundamental aspects of music theory. Time signatures and phrases were visualised through gestures and materials, such as stretches of silk and rubber balls. The qualities of scales and chords were enacted by the body. Training was underscored by the importance of presence, with each session including grounding warm-ups as a way of awakening the parasympathetic nervous system. As Dalcroze is suitable for social and kinaesthetic learners like me I wanted to draw from this method to arrange and teach Spa Songs.

Funded by a-n I undertook a longer course with Dalcroze UK at the Royal Northern College of Music. Participants were university music lecturers, schoolteachers, or professional orchestral musicians. I had the least musical knowledge in the group and certain tasks were difficult, especially if a tutor skipped between Dalcroze and music theory illustrated on a white board. However, when tutors used Dalcroze only I engaged well. Dalcroze requires the ability to generate creative responses and there were exercises where I was more competent than others due to my training in Fine Art, which encourages improvisation and risk taking, as well as taking responsibility for generating creative responses.

On returning to London, I incorporated elements of Rhythmics and Plastique Animèe into the development of Spa Songs, whilst continuing with solfège to develop my understanding of harmonic intervals.

Spa Songs

We dance
    closed eyes raised arms.
We dance
    closed arms raised eyes.

Two harmonic phrases intersect in a polyrhythm. Performers shift their arms and gaze through the air to match musical phrases. This establishes a physical score that ensures the two parts lock into each other, syncopating visually and aurally.

The fine line
between
creation and destruction
is a high wall
that leads
to nowhere but to itself.

In another song a crisp, bounding melody is sung in time to a circular procession of feet. The circle splits into three concentric rings which each sing a different part. These harmonic

variations ludically intersect whilst the lyrics explore balance, cycles and the tidal walls that become roads in Bermondsey. The subject matter of the song; of barriers becoming passages and historical motifs repeating themselves, is enacted in its performance.

Another song begins with an improvised soup of textures that gradually build into three tidal glissandos. These slow waves of minor chords form the shifting ground for a narrative melody that swims on the surface. The tones and textures were built from a restricted palette of notes and performers hover between improvising their delivery and perceiving choreographic queues that signal a shift in the music. As each glissando grows arms arc out, painted capes accentuate the swell of this watery movement. At the end of each phrase performers take a breath and step, the sound of inhalation and swooshing feet echo in the underground chamber of the tunnel shaft. The acoustics of this Victorian industrial relic act as a secular cathedral. The underground location on the banks of the Thames gives the performance an Orphic feel, of descending to the underworld and witnessing a rite of passage.

Through studying Dalcroze I allowed my 'body to become itself a medium, an instrument for the resonance of sound' (Juntunen 2016: 148). As performers we circumnavigated the written score by inscribing sound in our bodies. Then, by describing the sound in space we visualised it for the audience, animating musical arrangements and movements like 'a "living analysis" of the musical score.' (Juntunen 2016: 150).

For me, the most important influence of Dalcroze on the performance of Spa Songs was the way this technique superseded its role as method of teaching my work to others. The process of physically scoring the piece so that voice and movement were symbiotic meant that the aesthetics of whole work were very distinct. The piece wasn't song with dance, but a hybrid where movement correlated with musical dynamics as well as suggesting or symbolising themes within the work itself.

> Communication is communion
> Communication is communion
> Communication is communion
> Communication is communion

An image of community is symbolised in the form of a choir/chorus. Histories of place, people and power can be explored through the ways individual voices relate to the whole chorus (Small [1977] 1984). Does this group move and sound in ways that are dissonant or consonant, out of sync or regimented, full of tension or safely resolved? By presenting the 'sonorous form' (Juntunen 2016) of an embodied score, that draws the music in space and time, I hoped to make the piece accessible: to provide ways for the audience to enter into the content and structure of the work; and to empathise with the performers.

> We are in the circle – it concerns us. In its round the chorus traces the human circle. Marking the rhythm that reminds us: You too, you too.
> (Cixous 1999: 198)

Figure 2: Fay Nicolson, Spa Songs, 2018. Performance. 28 minutes. Brunel Museum, London. Copyright Fay Nicolson.

Fresh Motor Entity

> Dalcroze teaching engages numerous capacities and qualities of a student, and personal transformation is not limited in connection with music.
> (Juntunen 2016: 153)

In my practice, performance and image making symbiotically inform each other. After making Spa Songs I began drawing. I moved away from the bold prints I had been producing; my previous use of Photoshop and exploration of digital surfaces felt disembodied and remote. I desired direct physical engagement with and through mark making. I started thinking about connections between voice and mark, choreography and improvisation, body and space whilst making drawings of and about performance.

> The grain is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.
> (Barthes 1977: 188)

The grain of the voice felt akin to the cadence of a mark; ink gliding like melos down a page. The quality of a line was like the voicing of a musical phrase. I started conceptualizing my use of colour differently by imagining specific colour palettes operating like musical modes. These tight constellations of colour values suggested phenomenological, cultural, and personal associations and produced affects. We can understand affects as 'moments of intensity, a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter' (O'Sullivan 2001: 152). I became interested in holistic and somatic responses to both visual and sonic tonal relationships: how certain combinations of hues or tones appear to jump and clash whilst others resonate and complement. Embodied music theory helped me recognise aesthetic relationships in sight as well as sound.

My somatic musical training had given me new metaphors in which to conceptualise the perception of colour and use of mark. Beyond this, Dalcroze may have catalysed a more sensitive mode of perception and response.

> Dalcroze training aims to develop not only bodily skills but also bodily knowing or "bodily knowledge," meaning improved knowing in and through the body (Parviainen, 2002). This knowledge is acquired through observing our own movements and through "listening to" our kinaesthetic sensations.
> (Juntunen 2016: 153)

Dalcroze revealed to me analogues between listening/sounding and drawing via the obvious fact that they both require strong connections between perception and action, the adoption of a 'listening attitude' (Juntunen 2016), and the development of kinetic/proprioceptive capacities (Sheets-Johnston 2011). I had a renewed interest in bodies as expressive tools, an increased ability to observe and transcribe, and an interest in the ways different approaches to drawing encourage different approaches to thinking. What is it about Dalcroze that may enable its effects to spill over from musical appreciation into other forms of creativity? Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Anthony Storr states that 'the auditory apparatus is itself primarily concerned with symmetry […] and balance' and that the 'vestibular organ […] orientates us to gravity, and provides essential information about the position of our own bodies' (1997: 40). The act of listening is connected to tracing the edges of ones one body in the context of the world – a type of somatic observation.

From the structure of the ear to more recent developments in neuroscience, practitioners and researchers of Emile-Dalcroze's pedagogy claim that it predicts or confirms findings in neuroscientific research (Davidson 2023, Juntunen 2016), and that 'if learning is seen as the development of mental representations, it is crucial to understand that the only way to build representations in the cortex is through body movement' (Hodges and Gruhn 2012: 212). Therefore, by educating our bodies in rhythm and by rhythm (Dalcroze 1921) Dalcroze was

making case that 'Minds are not embodied. Bodies are mindful'. (Sheets Johnstone 2011: 464).

Phenomenology also centres experience at the crux of learning, motor development and making sense of both the world and the self.

> Sometimes a cluster of new meanings is formed: our former movements are integrated into a fresh motor entity, the first visual data into a fresh sensory entity, our natural powers suddenly come together in a richer meaning, which hitherto has been merely foreshadowed in our perceptual or practical field, and which has made itself felt in our experience by no more than a certain lack, and which by its coming suddenly reshuffles the elements of our equilibrium and fulfils our blind expectation. (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002: 177)

These different disciplines all yield theoretical explorations of the connection between experience and increased psychomotor ability, placing both Albers' and Jaques-Dalcroze's pedagogies in a broader scientific and philosophical context.

Somatic Images

In the dance studio pairs of people are taking turns to gently move their partner's body. I feel my arm guided into an unusual stretch, followed by lifted foot. I process these physical suggestions and rearrange my balance, awaiting the next touch prompt.
Later I am sounding, improvising a set of vocal phrases. I explore the limits of pitch, qualities of sound, repetition, and difference. I try to pull unusual sonic textures out of the possibilities of my body. My partner responds to these sounds, interpreting them with shifts in movement: balancing high to slinking across the floor, smooth, then sharp, a drawing danced. Across the room a cacophonous soup of noise and dance bubbles. I am absorbed in my task but also observe the group. I record the session in my memory, framing it through the lens of someone who draws performing bodies and reduces spatial perceptions into planar representations. These images feed my imagination.

In my studio I re-enact exercises from this improvisation workshop (led by theatre practitioner Kate Hilder at Siobhan Davies in October 2023). I find Hilder's connection between voice and movement extremely close to approaches in Dalcroze. I document myself then grapple with ways to communicate movement through layering and erasure. I am making visual notes for future teaching or performances – enacted sketches that broach the impossibility of documenting the sensations of learning.

I begin to draw from these manipulated images and through doing so consider Merleau-Ponty's enigmatic statement about learning to see formal qualities (in this instance colour).

‘To learn to see colours it is to acquire a certain style of seeing, a new use of one’s own body: it is to enrich and recast the body image.’ ([1945] 2002: 177).

One benefit of Dalcroze is the way it encourages students to develop mental representations of physical movements (Juntunen 2016) thus developing somatosensory skill. The mechanics of the relationship between observing movement, imagining movement, and moving are discussed in detail by experimental psychologists Anema & Dijkerman (2013). In their literature review they draw from numerous studies to make the case that motor imagery (the mental rehearsal of movement) overlaps with the motor network that controls the performance of movement. Moreover, the types of motor imagery alter depending on whether one imagines themselves executing a movement in the 3rd or the 1st person. Imagining oneself moving in the 3rd person (as if observed by another) generates visuospatial information – what things look like and their location in space. Imagining the execution of movement in the 1st person generates kinaesthetic imagery – the perception of sensations and how movement feels in the body (Anema & Dijkerman, 2013). Anema & Dijkerman claim there is significant evidence to support that observing, mirroring, and simulating movement increases one’s ability to generate motor imagery and increases motor learning.
This connection between visualising movement and the development of fine motor skills could be relevant to consider in the context of Fine Art praxis, especially in drawing. From renewed interest in practical instruction and life drawing; to rethinking theoretical relationships between artist and subject; performing and observing; and the construction of gendered gazes.

Vital research on the connection between moving and seeing has also been undertaken by dancer and psychologist Guido Orgs (2014). Orgs describes two modes of looking: bottom-up and top-down. In bottom-up looking we process images in the Occipital Lobe (the ‘seeing’ area of the brain). Signals then proceed to more complex areas concerned with decision making. In the top-down mode of perception observations are first registered in the motor areas of the brain then proceed to other areas including vision. Orgs calls this the ‘motor way of seeing’, which is more stimulating and requires complex cognition (Orgs 2014). Through rigorous experimentation Orgs has proven that professional dancers ‘see’ dance differently to people with no dance experience. Prior experience of dance training results in the motor cortex being activated when observing live, or images of, movement (top-down seeing). Again, this highlights the fact that we perceive in radically different ways depending on our prior physical experiences. For me, this further problematizes the representation of bodies within still and moving images and the division between physical and intellectual education that remains in the UK education system.

Figure 3: Fay Nicolson, I Cannot I Cannot (III), (detail), 2023. Drawing. 34.8 x 41.2 cm. London. Copyright Fay Nicolson.

Body Problems

This journal issue sets out to investigate the connections between sound and drawing. I have investigated this via the additional consideration of the body. This positions *the body* at the centre of discourse, and more specifically *the senses* as they may be understood in aesthetics

(Machon, O'Sullivan), pedagogy (Albers, Dalcroze, Davidson, Juntunen), phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty), and Psychology and Neuroscience (Anema and Dijkerman, Orgs, Sheets-Johnston). There are specific issues that have not been discussed that I would now like to acknowledge. These contextualise and problematise my focus and provide a metatheoretical perspective.

I have discussed the kinaesthetic aspects of Jaques-Dalcroze's pedagogy and how they augment an individual's ability to imagine, perceive and act. Does Dalcroze encourage a general amelioration of psychomotor ability due to its focus on movement, or does the study of music itself ameliorate psychomotor ability? Neuroscientific studies have proven that any type of musical training alters the brain and leads to improved performance in other domains (such as language, arts, or mathematics) (Hodges and Wilkins 2015: 46). Perhaps this speaks to the plasticity of the brain (Malabou 2008), the developmental importance of studying creative subjects, and the need for more interdisciplinarity across Higher Education.

Drawing from holistic approaches in alternative philosophy and biology we can claim that all aspects of life are inherently connected, and movement is the vehicle through which we learn best about everything (Sheets-Johnston 2011). Has this interconnectedness been supressed by the legacies of Western Classical thought and capitalism? 'The centre of knowledge, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is the table' (Foucault [1970] 1994: 75). Anyone teaching Fine Art in HE today will be familiar with tables and their compartmentalising logic. Furthermore, 'Learning in higher education is popularly thought to pertain to the transfer of abstract and theoretical knowledge (Coffey 2013), and this process typically occurs in ways that largely ignore the physicality of learning.' (Hickey-Moody, Palmer, Sayers 2016: 214).

The idea of embodied and holistic knowledge being repressed by rationalist forms of knowledge is echoed in McGilchrist's work on the power struggle between the left and right hemispheres of the brain ([2010] 2019). McGilchrist explores how the right hemisphere (which primarily processes music and image, is preconceptual, understands flux and is emotionally sophisticated) is overruled by a dominant left hemisphere (which favours data, compartmentalisation, binaries, and self-assertion). McGilchrist argues that the left hemisphere has taken control and modelled the world in its image.

These anti-cartesian arguments position *embodied learning* as radical underdog, supressed by the state, market, and even the self, due to its latent liberatory threat. However, binaries between; mind and body; control and freedom; Apollonian and Dionysian are reductive. Cognition is not only equated with authoritarian control, nor embodiment only with joyful expression.

> a new art will emerge […] unanimous in the quest of an ideal and common outlet for emotion. This will lead to the call for a psycho-physical training based on the cult of

> natural rhythms […] New forms of music will come to birth having the power of animating masses of people, […] War is over, the coming generation will experience this need of forming groups for the expression of common emotion.
> (Dalcroze 1921: ix – xi)

Both Dalcroze and the Bauhaus grew out of the specific context of Europe between World War I and II, where institutions utilised a historic brand of romantic idealism to place artists at the centre of rebuilding an enlightened and orchestrated demos (Boomgaard and Taken 2012). Howard B. Segal gives a haunting account of the 'modernist cult of the physical' (1998: 8) claiming that the 'dark side of modernist physicality' grew out of a disenchantment with intellectual culture and language.

> the glorification of the sensual and intuitive at the expense of the rational verbal, also had broad social and political ramifications. A maligned intellectual culture was offset by a new emphasis on the training and education of the body.
> (Segal 1998: 3)

Segal describes how physical training was institutionalised and instrumentalised by the state; 'the disciplined communal training of the body' was used to promote 'a keen sense of national purpose and paramilitary alertness' (1998: 5). Segal mentions Dalcroze in relation to dance, as Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman were both his students. The former 'took an active role in the Nazi reorganization of German dance life' (Manning 1988: 318) and the later 'is an ambivalent figure because of her association with National Socialism' (Kew 2017: 211).

I am not claiming that embodied pedagogies are inherently authoritarian or fascist, but that it is important to place the pedagogies developed at the Bauhaus and Hellerau within the context of the political ideologies that intersect European modernism. Following this line of thought, we can suggest that the state's attitude to educating bodies is neither neutral nor necessarily benign and is subject to the dominant ideologies of the period. In today's neoliberal and technocapitalist society the state neglects and privatises the education of the body. Students across state schools and universities experience a paucity of embodied learning experiences (Fazackerley 2022, Hickey-Moody, Palmer, Sayers 2016) and must navigate a 'managerial-realism' which makes 'freedom measurable, controllable and manageable' (De Bruyne and Gielen 2012: 4-5).

As both pedagogical and neuroscientific research assert the benefits of embodied learning, how can we apply embodied approaches in ways that resist instrumentalization and remain critical?

Conclusion:

Returning to my original question: can engagement in embodied approaches to music education improve one's ability to draw? I would say yes. Through my practice I have physically and critically explored ways that Dalcroze (an embodied method of music education) can encourage a shift in focus towards (syn)aesthetic relationships whilst improving psychomotor skills.

Neuroscientific research offers evidence that music education leads to improvements in other domains (language, arts, mathematics) (Hodges and Wilkins 2015), and that embodied music education leads to improvement in psychomotor and visuospatial skills (Juntunen 2016). Whereas the work of Orgs (2014), Anema and Dijkerman (2013), and Hodges and Gruhn (2012) highlight the inherent connections between moving and seeing and the impact that physical education has on our ability to both imagine and perceive.

My unique position as a visual artist exploring music education enables my comparison of Dalcroze to other embodied modernist pedagogies, specifically teaching at the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College by Josef Albers. This provides the opportunity to put Dalcroze into a wider aesthetic and political context. Writing by Boomgaard and Taken (2012), Segal (1998), and Jaques-Dalcroze himself (1921) illuminates the nation/society building discourse of the time and suggests that embodied pedagogies are prone to instrumentalization at the hands of dominant political ideologies. We can make the simplified case that these modernist ideologies were both negative and positive. The danger is that trained physical subjects can be easily weaponised (symbolically or literally) (Segal 1998). A more benign perspective is that Jacques-Dalcroze's and Albers' pedagogies embody the social pre-occupations of their time; unity, harmony, and the need for artists to play a 'truly social role' in the aesthetic education of a nation (Boomgaard and Taken 2012: 93).

Is it possible to harness the optimistic ideals of embodied modernist pedagogies whilst resisting their instrumentalization? Today, that would mean recentring the arts within society and policy whilst fighting the malign aspects of neoliberalism: privatization; homogenization; and the development of 'tools to make freedom measurable, controllable and manageable'. (Gielen and De Bruyne 2012: 5).

I would briefly like to propose contemporary theoretical perspectives that could be applied alongside modernist pedagogies to ask critical questions about bodies, agency, and representation. In her paper on decolonising art and design education Belina Macgill states that 'deep listening in visual art and design education' enables a 'community of learners […] to understand the ways in which the systems of power and privilege shape the world around us and how we can use art and design practices to challenge and subvert these systems.' (MacGill 2023: 8).

Similarly, in their paper 'Diffractive Pedagogies: dancing across new materialist imaginaries', Hickey-Moody, Palmer and Sayers argue that 'embodied creative processes' allow students to 'find modalities of expression other than those that reproduce stereotypical constructions of their identity or dominant tropes of representation.' (313-4).

Finally, (syn)aesthetics (Machon 2011) could be a vital tool for ensuring embodied pedagogies move beyond discourse into praxis. I have drawn from (syn)aesthetics when describing my research in sections of this essay, and I see its potential for use in studio and workshop scenarios. The next step for this research would be to move beyond my own practice and to test out these theories in collaboration with other artists, musicians, and dancers.

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