

## Bone, Breath & Gesture: Practices of Embodiment by Don Hanlon Johnson

This century has witnessed an incomprehensible savaging of flesh. Its global and local wars, genocides, politically directed torture and famine, terrorist attacks, the selling of children and women into prostitution, and personal wanton violence to family members and street victims would be more than enough evidence for a non-terrestrial to condemn us for criminal disregard for the muscle fibers, fluids, and neural networks within which we live. An alien visitor might not notice, however, that these painfully tangible wounds to the body politic are symptomatic manifestations of highly abstract ideas that rapidly gained a disproportionate amount of physical power. While violence and greed have always been a part of human life, this century stands out for its sophisticated political, religious, and scientific justifications for sacrificing human lives in favor of complicated abstractions. Palpable values of caring for infants and the aging, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, nurturing the sources of intelligence found in explorations of bodily feeling and movement hold the lowest possible places on scales of values motivation actual social choices.

Although muffled by the din of those dominant voices, there has been a steady resistance building among innovators who have devoted their lives to developing strategies for recovering the wisdom and creativity present in breathing, sensing, moving, and touching. They worked quietly, wrote very little. Typically, they spent their lives outside the vociferous worlds of university and research clinics. This series of volumes gathers these voices from out-of-print writings, unpublished lectures, as well as some new writing by teachers who have never before been published.

The outlines of this movement of resistance can be discerned as early as the middle of the last century when a number of people began to question the dominant notions of the body and healing.

A typical example is Leo Kofler. He was born in 1837 in Austria and started training for his life's work as an organist and choirmaster at eleven years old. In 1860, he was afflicted by tuberculosis, a disease which had taken several of his relatives including three sisters. From that time on, his breathing, his livelihood, was in jeopardy. He emigrated in 1866 for a job at the German Lutheran Church in Newport Kentucky. Anna, his oldest and favorite sister who had been the picture of perfect health when he left Austria, sent him a photograph in 1876 showing how afflicted she had become. She died three years later. "But I love this life." He wrote of her death, "for the sake of the work that I do, and I love my fork for the sake of my life and that of my dear wife and children. I did not wish to die, and I fully made up my mind to fight death." He set upon a life's work of studying the nature of breath, both from the standpoint of anatomical studies and practical exercises. By 1887, he gained the position of organist and choirmaster of St. Paul's Chapel in Manhattan, a position in which he remained for the rest of his life. He had healed himself and developed a method for teaching others how to free restrictions to the breath which

he described in his book, *The Art of Breathing*.<sup>1</sup>

Two German women, Clara Schlawffhorst and Hedwig Andersen, came to New York to study with him. When they returned to Germany they translated his book, which and rapidly gone out of print in English, into German. That translation is now in its thirty-sixth edition. Inspired by his method, they founded the Rotenburg school, where Elsa Gindler, who inspired the work of a number of people in this volume, eventually studied.

Like Kofler, the innovators in this volume embarked on their various paths of discovery when they bumped up against problems that were insoluble by methods then available in medicine, dance, exercise, and psychology.

Many were faced with a physical dysfunction or illness which threatened their life and work, and for which their physicians could offer no relief. Gindler and tuberculosis; F.M. Alexander had chronic laryngitis; Gerda Alexander had rheumatic fever; Moshe Feldenkrais, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen and Judith Aston had severe accidents leaving crippling bone fractures.

Others found a gap between the luminosity they found in bodily awareness and the sterility of existing methods of teaching exercise, dance, and physical manipulation. Charlotte Selver was drawn to seek out Gindler in frustration at the lack of imagination and spontaneity in the teaching of *Gymnastik*. As a young woman, Ilsa Middendorf found depths of spiritual insight in breathing that had no match in the formalized techniques then popular in Berlin. Ida Rolf felt that physical therapists, chiropractors, and osteopaths failed to appreciate the revolutionary consequences for human consciousness inherent in a balanced body.

These pioneers in embodiment are typically a feisty lot, unwilling to take at face value a poor medical prognosis, a dull exercise class, ordinary states of consciousness. Rejecting the bleakness of conventional wisdom, they have chosen to survive outside the mainstream, like artists who often struggle to make a living by doing something other than their hearts work. Marion Rosen and Carola Speads worked for years as physical therapist; Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen as an occupational therapist; Emilie Conrad Da'Oud as a fashion model and nightclub entertainer; Moshe Feldenkrais as a professor of engineering. Many of their students now live as quiet outlaws, neither psychologists, nor physical therapists, nor physicians, go bearing resemblances to all of those officially sanctioned professionals. Those few who, like Marion Rosen and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, have gone through the process of gaining an academic degree or professional license typically do it not primarily for interest in the material itself—psychology, osteopathy, medicine—but for the sake of protecting their practices and giving their clients access to 3rd party payments.

Kofler and his Rotenburg Errors are not an isolated esoteric school. There is an unbroken lineage from him and a handful of European and American contemporaries to a large number of teachers practicing today throughout the world. Every teacher represented in this volume is connected with every other one in an identifiable web of interconnections. If one examines the history of any one of the seemingly fragmented methods of contemporary embodiment practices, one is taken back to 1800's New England; Kirksville, Missouri; Melbourne Australia; Wuppertal and Munich in Germany; and Vienna Austria.

this manage is not simply the abstract one of theory, created by a common readership of texts. there are several teachers in the San Francisco Bay area, for example, who can trace back the succession of their teachers directly to teachers in that earlier.

This long history gives the lie to the common misperception that the methods found within this community are not well founded in scientific research, that they are “new age” and “alternative” two more reliable methods of western biomedicine and psychology. any of the practices mentioned in this collection has a longer history of clinical work behind it than does psychoanalysis, any of the younger psychotherapies, or physical medicine. Many suffering from chronic physical pain, for example, have been attracted to these works because of countless reports of their successes in these kinds of afflictions. While biomedicine can point to many empirical studies of its practices for dealing with chronic pain, their ironic conclusions point increasingly to the failure of drugs, surgery, and physical therapy to alter the course of such widespread complaints as back pain, arthritis headaches, and repetitive motion syndrome.<sup>2</sup>

Yet it is true that it has been difficult to engage in the kind of widespread dialogue that is needed to produce significant reflection and reliable research on the efficacy of these works. The tenacious split between mind and body infects even those who vigorously criticize it. One of its most widespread manifestations is in an institutional split between theory and practice. The dazzlingly skillful work, representing lifetimes of study, observation, trial, error, and reflection represented in this volume is given short shrift by academic scholars, medical researchers, educators, and funders. Schools of embodiment practices are relegated to new age self-help techniques, in a dismal sometimes abetted by practitioners within the field who are unaware of the full riches of their own heritage. Search widespread failures to grasp the full meaning of these practices are similar to misunderstandings encountered by teachers of ancient systems of meditation and the martial arts. Tai chi chuan, acupuncture, hatha yoga, and vipassana, for example, are ancient complex systems of educating many aspects of the person. they include mental and imaginative practices, dietary prescriptions, ethical norms, hands-on techniques, movement exercises, and methods for sensing various flows of energy in the body. In the West, one or another element-needles, moxibustion, concentration on breathing, a morelized movement sequence, a particular herbal formula-is lifted out of its holistic context. A small fragment of these rich traditions is subjected to a reductionist empirical study by a medical or psychological researcher from a major university and proposed to the media world as a promising new alternative, given a new name and often franchise.

It is no surprise that the community represented in this volume is not well understood. Its principal teachers have worked hard to break the hold of supposedly rational verbosity on the quieter intelligence of flesh. With the exception of a few innovators and their heirs- Wilhelm Reich, Edmund Jacobson, and Walter Cannon, for example- they write little and often in fragments, close to the logic of bones interlocking with each other without a proliferation of unnecessary adhesions. Identifying the harmony of voices of the tradition is similar to the tasks facing scholars of other traditions that have existed on the margins of the dominant culture. Feminists have had to ferret fragments of women’s wisdom out of diaries and bundles of old letters found in dusty attic trunks. Pre-colonial tribal Americans and African Americans have had to go into the nooks and crannies of small towns and remote areas to seek out living memories of the ancient wisdom traditions pulverized by the onrush of Euro-American development.

Despite the many lines of alliance, both practical and theoretical, between the people in

this community and those of older cultures, I have included, except for one Australian, only Western Europeans or North Americans of European origin. The pie might have been sliced otherwise. For example, I can imagine a volume on embodied breath that would include Ilsa Middendorf, Elsa Gindler, hatha yoga, Taoism, and Russian Hesychasm. My choice for the present volume is based on the fact that those other communities have already initiated vital moves to gather their lost and damaged sources of wisdom. They are already far ahead of our community in articulating the wisdom they have to offer a traumatized social body. We in this community have more basic work to do to become more fit to join our voices with resistant strains from these other traditions.

A similar reason prompted my exclusion of representative writings from the schools of progressive relaxation, autogenic training, and classical manipulative osteopathy, despite their common inspiration with the ones represented here. These three schools of practical work evolved within the American university world, and already enjoy a rich theoretical and empirical body of literature.<sup>3</sup>

Not having easy access to their common origins, Feldenkrais, Alexander Trager, and Hakomi practitioners, Rolfers, Rosen workers, Sensory Awareness teachers, and their co-workers from other schools think of themselves as isolated from one another, and more unique or special than they are. They often compete by exaggerating their own claims and devaluing the work of others engaged in the same basic task of regaining a measure of fleshy sanity. Ida Rolf and Charlotte Selver, for example, can seem so far apart that it would be impossible to speak of them as sharing a similar vision: Dr. Rolf with her elbow probing people's fascia latae edging them towards her ideal of perfection; Ms. Selver eschewing any form of intrusion into one's natural unfolding. And yet, when compared to the dominant philosophy of our culture, they stand out as fighting in favor of a common vision of the meaningfulness of our flesh, bones and eyes.

During the past two decades, a few of us have made efforts to bring to awareness the unity of vision existing among these many schools of work, with the aims of initiating more careful philosophical and empirical reflection, improving our educational standards, and taking a public stance in favor of the needs of the body increasingly at risk. In 1977, the late Thomas Hanna initiated the journal *Somatics*, which has provided a forum for many different teachers to speak of their work. He wrote a series of essays, the first of which is reproduced in this volume, offering the first definition for the common vision of this field. He gave it the name 'Somatics,' adding the significant final 's' to distinguish it from the commonly used adjective, "somatic." "Somatic" as in "psychosomatic" has been used to mean the physicalistic body as distinct from the mind or soul of a person, or to designate the musculoskeletal frame as distinct from the nervous and visceral systems of the body, and from the cranium. Hanna recovered the older Christian mystical use of the term, whose source is in the New Testament. Paul distinguishes between the Greek word *sarx*, which has the sense of "a hunk of meat," from *soma*, which Paul used to designate the luminous body transformed by faith. Hanna argued that it was the sacral body, gross and mechanistically conceived, separate from mind and imagination, that dominated Western thought and medicine. In his view, the teachers of embodiment practices were recovering a hidden sense of the wise, imaginative, and creative body, thus creating a "Somatics," what Edmund Husserl, the founder of modern phenomenology called "somatology."<sup>4</sup>

For over thirty years, Esalen Institute in Big Sur has provided a climate in which teachers of these various schools can interact, and in which students have been able to study many different methods. Innovators like Robert Hall, Richard Strozzi Heckler, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Ron Kurtz, and Ilana Rubinfeld synthesized approaches from many

different schools. The first Somatics graduate programs were established at Antioch University West (now at California Institute of Integral Studies, the co-publisher of this series), Naropa Institute, and Ohio State University. Elizabeth Beringer and David Zemach-Bersin founded Somatic Resources which published a number of out-of-print books by authors in this field and sponsored many international teachers coming together to give trainings. Richard Grossinger and Lindy Hough of North Atlantic Books have published a modest line of texts in the field.<sup>5</sup> In 1987, a group of European practitioners founded an international professional society of somatics practitioners, which has held yearly congresses throughout the world attended by hundreds of teachers and practitioners. In 1992 Esalen's founder Michael Murphy published his encyclopedic *The Future of the Body* which outlines the history of these various movement and documents the research behind them.<sup>6</sup>

These various moves towards an integrated field are justified by the fact that the innovations created by this quirky group are not haphazard and idiosyncratic, though to the outsider - sometimes even to the insider - they often appear as a proliferation of methods and therapeutic approaches. Underlying the various techniques and schools, one finds a desire to regain an intimate connection with bodily processes: breath, movement impulses, balance, and sensibility. In that shared impulse, this community is best understood within a much broader movement of resistance to the West's long history of denigrating the value of the human body and the natural environment. The resistance comes from many quarters: psychoanalysis, poetry and literature, American pragmatism, European phenomenology, feminism, Marxism, tribal and non-Western activists, and intellectuals. The unique contribution of the people in this volume is the development of practical strategies for effecting a return to the healing intelligence of the body. Just as solar engineers and organic farmers have demonstrated alternatives to the energy and agricultural technologies that have alienated us from the earth, these somatics innovators have challenged the dominant models of exercise, manipulation, and self-awareness that alienate people from their bodies. They have developed alternative ways of moving, touching, and being aware that bring us closer to the wisdom inherent in the ancient structures of collagen, nerve fiber, and cerebrospinal fluid, thus, the subtitle of this series of books, "Practices of Embodiment."

This volume is devoted to the most basic teachings of this tradition: about experiencing (Section I), about the personally meaningful intricacies of bodily structure and function (II). Section IV is a collection of beginnings of a field theory of these works, followed by a bibliography, a list of pilot studies of various methods, and information about how to contact various schools. The second volume contains the voices of those like Wilhelm Reich, Alexander Lowen, Nina Bull, Gerda Boyesen, Lillemor Johnsen, Stanley Keleman, Ilana Rubinfeld, Robert Hall, Ron Kurtz, and Eugene Gendlin, who have articulated the implications of embodiment for the revisioning of psychology. The third volume will deal with the flowering of these approaches into skilled means for altering the course of bodily development, demonstrated in narratives of actual work with individuals.

Perhaps the significance of drawing together the various voices that make up this community of embodiment practices can best be understood in reference to its polar opposite, the schools of systematic political torture - not the wanton violence of urban gangs and psychopaths, but the meticulously calculated abuse of the body aimed at transforming the consciousness of the tortured into submission to the regime of agents of the torture. These sciences and schools are sanctioned by governments, including our own, which offer favored governments training in torture at certain of our military bases. The teachers are physicians and psychologists expert in how to use sophisticated technologies to keep people alive at the margins of death with the maximum amount of

pain. It is an impolite topic, rarely discussed in mainstream media or in the conference rooms of major American foundations, and yet its existence, like the omnipresence of radioactive substances, is everywhere.<sup>7</sup> In 1987, when I first joined with a small group of people to initiate a healing center in San Francisco for survivors of such torture, I was asked by funding agencies to estimate the population in need. I guessed that there were 700 in the Bay Area. By the time of this writing, I would say that the number is closer to 40,000 from Central America, Brazil, Cambodia, Burma, Tibet, Haiti, South Africa, China, Iran, the former USSR. Even this number does not include those still alive from the Holocaust, or the man families who themselves have been permanently damaged by the torture of their loved ones. Add the numbers of prostituted children, the lower class men used as fodder for war, the women and children who are abused by personally violent men and once can begin to sense the climate of pervasive abuse to the flesh.

To clean up such an atmosphere we need a strong public voice on behalf of the sensitivity of flesh, the sacredness of nature, the importance of health and affection over religious and political ideologies and over stark greed. We hope that this volume will help weave together the tens of thousands of visionaries who are deeply devoted to the wisdom of material reality, and will increase the likelihood of joining somatics practitioners more effectively together with community organizers, tribal peoples, ecologists, artists, and others, who are struggling to be heard over the bloated bellowings of those who would continue the old savaging of flesh under the guise of an obscure superior knowing.

## Notes

□The Art of Breathing As the Basis for Tone Production (7th Revised Edition. New York: Edgar S. Warner and Co., 1901; available in the Lincoln Center Library), 15, 16

□For example, the body of empirical research of Dr. Richard Deyo of the University of Washington Medical School, which has recently appeared in the popular press, gives a dreary picture of the various mainstream strategies that are used for the relief of chronic back pain, most of which, according to his studies, have no evidence to support their predictive success. Michael Van Korff, ScD; William Barlow, PhD; Daniel Cherkin, PhD; and Richard A. Deyo, MD, MPH, "Effects of Practice Style in Managing Back Pain," *Ann Intern Med.* 1994; 121:187-195.

□Despite the fact that these methods were developed in the United States by Edmund Jacobson (progressive relaxation), Johannes Schultz (autogenic training), and Andrew Still (osteopathy), their original genius is found more intact in Europe than here where they have been digested and fragmented by the dualistic medical world within which they grew up.

□Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Third Book. *Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences.* Ted E. Klein and William E. Pohl. (The Hague:Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), p. 2,3. Cited by Elizabeth Behnke, "On the intertwining of phenomenology and somatics," *The Newsletter of the Study Project in Phenomenology of the Body*, 6:1 (Spring, 1993), 11.

□Richard Grossinger's classic *Planet Medicine* (Berkeley: North Atlantic, 1995) brilliantly situates these somatics practices within the vast history of healing approaches.

□Michael Murphy, *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature* (Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher, 1992).

□Elaine Scarry's uncomfortable book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford, 1985), is a good introduction to this anti-therapy of scientifically generated pain.