

Singapore Management University

# Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

---

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

---

10-2020

## Introduction

Stephanie BURRIDGE

Singapore Management University, sburridge@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass\\_research](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research)



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

---

### Citation

BURRIDGE, Stephanie. (2020). Introduction. In *Embodied Performativity in Southeast Asia: Multidisciplinary Corporealities* (pp. 1-6). : Taylor and Francis.

Available at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass\\_research/3305](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/3305)

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email [cherylids@smu.edu.sg](mailto:cherylids@smu.edu.sg).

# Introduction

*Stephanie Burridge*

This eclectic monograph investigates corporealities across diverse arts practices – dance, music, fashion, visual and performance art. The six chapters resulted from a multidisciplinary seminar series at LASALLE College of the Arts, a tertiary arts institution in Singapore – the unifying themes were the body, embodied performativity and multidisciplinary. This research series on what initially appear to be disparate titles was curated to facilitate dialogues about the notion of the body as central to all creative practice, with an objective to enable and enhance interdisciplinary relationships and pedagogy. *Corporeality – the body as central to artmaking and the creative process* included three presentations from dance and contemporary music practitioners, while *Transcultural hybridity – investigating embodied interdisciplinary creative languages*, the second session, introduced a performance artist, a fashion designer and a curator/historian of visual culture. The six teaching artists came together to not only present their current research but participate in robust discussions about the scope of the words ‘corporealities’ and ‘embodiment’. All acknowledged a plurality of meanings that extended beyond the physical, culturally contextualized body to explorations of mind/body connections: somatic and visceral experiences expressed through movement and gesture. Although each artist’s research was presented as a discrete study with specific case examples and outcomes, an underlying intention was to find commonalities and linkages between them. Theoretical framing and methods, along with performative workshops and performance/exhibition descriptors, flowed across the topic areas and aligned creative practice and the body. Modelling of cross-disciplinary pedagogies and opportunities to extend artistic boundaries of collaboration emerged.

## **South- East Asian focus**

The research was centred in Singapore, with outreach projects, workshops and performance events in other selected Asian countries (Thailand and Myanmar) as well as Australia, the UK and Germany. Representations of the body materialised across multiple planes, including immersive, experiential and reflective domains. Conversations about creation processes through embodied knowledge relating to space, time and place support the critical analysis in these essays. The South-East Asian context of cultural traditions; ritual; and symbolism, metaphors and imagery often gave a sense of a journey; this narrative was a recurring theme, essentialising the performative practice as the artists mapped responses to the same work as it travelled to different countries. All sought collaborations and performative opportunities and inspiration as these transitional journeys became embedded in their practice. These trajectories are documented in the research chapters; for example, observations of Javanese Wayang shadow puppets inspired a new direction in contemporary fashion by incorporating the image of an extended body by including the shadow.

A sense of place, cultural memories and embodied ways of thinking and moving emerged as new audiences, and participants, engaged with each project. Charting and recording these variations are central to comprehending the impact of art as it crosses borders – geographical, cultural, social and educational, among others. The liminal spaces existing between the artist and the audience, the teacher and the participants, the creator and the wearer, become illuminated zones of experience, incorporating action and reflection. In these shifting cultural contexts viewers are challenged to respond using their own embodied knowledge via immersion, improvisation, listening, experiencing, touching and viewing.

Materiality also featured as a connection in several chapters. Paper – as folded material echoing traditional Japanese origami, paper boats carrying memories and folded pattern making material – juxtaposed a simple craft redolent with tactile childhood memories with complex ritual and spirituality. Disrupting the simplicity of this source of inspiration is the use of current techniques in neurobiology to power a contemporary synthesizer, as outlined in the last chapter of this volume. Metal and jumbled wiring clash, driven by biological human tissue – here the mechanics of bodily function united with medical technology give rise to potentialities that seem to blur the edges of embodiment as a central creative impetus.

The body in death polarizes movement and stillness yet invites agency for reflection, memories, thoughts and feelings, linking, in the case of the artwork in this volume, the sculptural artefact with the viewer. This matrix of existential reality reverberates into threshold areas with the body as a responsive, evocative site, engaging with the subliminal, stored memory fields; dreams; archival traces; and the mundane.

### **Theoretical framing**

The historiography of the body (Foucault, 1972) thematically layers contexts resulting in a transcultural hybridity with multiple creative languages and inflections – a site for spontaneous body expression and improvisation (Sheets- Johnstone, 2011). This seminar series foregrounded personal interpretation of symbol systems and nuances across softening borders of disciplines as the researchers sought to create and align practice through a theoretical lens, sometimes as a tool for inspiration or for reflection and clarification.

While the artists acknowledge the theories of scholars across their discrete fields, the common interest in the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau- Ponty (2001) and post- structuralist Gilles Deleuze (1993) emerged as a shared thread: the first for uniting the essential notions of embodiment with phenomenology; the second for the idea of transformation and ‘becoming’. More directly for this volume the image of the Deleuzian ‘fold’ is critiqued in two chapters, one on dance and another on sound – both directly named this as their sustaining direction.

### **Pedagogy**

Transference from an original idea into a working method to enable sharing to students is a concern in most chapters. Several projects narrated in the volume included tertiary- level student involvement, while others adopted reflective practices not only on the creative process and outcomes but also on how these might impact and influence student teaching and learning. Juxtapositions across these stratifications threw up fresh perspectives, approaches and actualizations in a mesh of pathways and cross-reference points. Some ideas, for example, including the shadow as part of body image in design, are clearly translated into a method that can be implemented as an experimental option for fashion students; other image-based work, like that incorporating the idea of a fold in dance or a paper boat carrying memories, open up spaces for individual interpretation and expression.

Other ideas, such as student's immersion to tease out philosophical strands, work on a conceptual level that encourages deeper critical analysis and evaluation for students. The summary below introduces the concepts and practice in the chapters in this book.

## Chapter summary

Performance artists **Elizabeth de Roza** and **Shelly Quick** take their project to three continents to explore the body, cultural specificity and audience engagement in *Paper Boats*. Here the body is present as a performative springboard for audience participation as they move together, creating and recreating memories. This transaction of the embodied self is facilitated through storytelling and the use of simple props that enable a ritualistic flow and transcend time in various ways. The ceremonial burning of the paper boats in the final performance is both a cathartic dissimulation of all the shared memories and a sense of closure as metaphors abound.

Contemporary musician **Timothy O'Dwyer** discusses a project as a manifestation of incorporeal and corporeal events using Leibniz's Psychic Geometry, Musical Monads and other conceptual trajectories found in Deleuze's *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Staged in Singapore and Cologne, *The Fold* is a collaborative composing project involving musicians from disparate cultural and stylistic backgrounds. The musicians came together to compose written scores that were then used for improvisation during their performances. Musical monads and other conceptual trajectories found in Deleuze's *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* are incorporated (1993).

Dancer/choreographer and educator **Susan Sentler** works with somatic specialist **Glenna Batson** to devise body imagery also aligned to Deleuzian theory of the fold as image-based practice. Designed to enhance conservatory dancers' perception and attention to the dynamics of bodily folding, the improvisational structures give rise to an embodied ontology of *becoming* whose unfixing boundaries are iterative, non-linear and liminal. The multiplicity of movement patterns emerging from folding give way to a fractal field of potential which can redefine bodily dimensionality.

Fashion designer **Dinu Bodiciu** problematizes the conventional methods in fashion's approach to the body as a subject to be dressed. By expanding the borders of the body into the territory of the two dimensionality of shadows (inspired by Javanese Wayang puppets) he notes the potential to dissolve perceptions of race, size, individuality, gender and identity. Under the influence of light, transient features or shadows that the body produces

onto surrounding surfaces can be considered impalpable extensions which trace our existence and continuously accompany us.

Art historian and curator **Clare Veal** examines the early sculptural and installation practices of renowned Thai artist and writer Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook (b. 1957) from an intermedial perspective, articulating how the production and reception of her sculptures and installations involve an interplay between moving and static bodies. Felt experiences, contemplative and reflective zones of incubation, have transformative congruency to receptive viewers who might engage with the work culturally, politically or antithetically.

Finally, **Darren Moore** moves into new territory, creating an artwork that embodies biological material with a musical body, using cultured in-vitro human neurons as the engine to drive a custom-made analogue modular synthesiser. *cellF* is the world's first neuron-driven synthesiser. It is a collaborative project at the cutting edge of experimental art and music that brings together artists, musicians, designers and scientists to create a cybernetic musical entity. *cellF* is an autonomous, bioanalogue electronic musical instrument designed to operate independently and interact with human musicians.

## **Embodied performativity**

American philosopher Sheets-Johnstone states, 'As one might wonder about the world in words, I am wondering the world directly, in movement' (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 422), while Indian dancer/choreographer/activist Chandralekha's life's work was the interrogation of the body – the feminist body; the sexual, political, the creative and resistant body. She states, 'My concern is with the body... where does it begin...where does it end?' (Chandralekha, 2014). The essence is the connection of the embodied self, expressed through movement, relating to the world.

Similarly, the research in this volume admits investigation through lived experiences transcending the essentialised notion of a physical being and moving towards a convergence of the biological body and somatic, visceral comprehension. Centralising the body as a 'site of perception' and experience (Dewey, 1934; Shusterman, 2013) enables shared traces, relics or artefacts to exist in moments of time; here improvisation might be a fleeting ephemeral moment, while a sculpture, musical composition or garment have different permanence. This multidisciplinary corporeality offers insights across art-making perspectives and enables myriad entry

points to creativity, from whole body framing to gestural impulses, meditation, improvisation and play.

This ‘soft landing’ for the imagination is in stark contrast to the voices of disrupters who seek to negotiate the proposition of the body via new technologies, biomechanics and augmented realities. Artists such as Stelarc (1991) celebrate possibilities that negate an elevated platform for the body by articulating its limitations. The ontology of the body comes into question as artists augment its boundaries utilising prosthetics, tissue art and transgenic art (O’Donnell, 2011).

Unifying the essays in this monograph is the body... and it invites a response. The six essays reposition the corporealities and challenge parameters through embodied performativity across diverse disciplines. Biological function; extrinsic illumination through shadows; poetics evoking memory fields as a depository for embodied meaning; and cultural specificity through time, space and place collide – the possibilities flow in a continuum.

## References

- Deleuze, Gilles. (1993). *The Fold: Leibnitz and the Baroque*. Minneapolis, MN: Regents of the University of Minnesota.
- Dewey, John. (1934). *Art as Experience*, reprinted in 1989, *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 10. (ed. J. Boydston). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Foucault, Micheal. (1972). *The Archeology of Knowledge*. (trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith). New York: Pantheon.
- Merleau- Ponty, Maurice. (2001). *Phenomenology of Perception [Phénoménologie de la perception]*. Routledge & Kegan Paul (First Published 1954).
- O’Donnell, Ryan P. (2011). ‘Posthuman: Exploring the Obsolescence of the Corporeal Body in Contemporary Art’, *Inquiries*, Vol. 3, No. 8, pp. 1/1. <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/564/posthuman-exploring-the-obsolescence-of-the-corporeal-body-in-contemporary-art> (accessed April 5, 2019).
- Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. (2011). *The Primacy of Movement: Advances in Consciousness Research*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamin Publishing Company.
- Shusterman, Richard. (2013). ‘Body and the Arts: The Need for Somaesthetics’, *SAGE Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192112469159>.
- Stelarc. (1991) ‘Prosthetics, Robotics and Remote Existence: Postrevolutionary Strategies’, *Leonardo*, Vol. 24, No. 5, pp. 591–595. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/1575667?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1575667?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) (accessed May 7, 2019).
- Sharira – Chandralekha’s Explorations in Dance. (2014) Directed by Ein Lall; Producer & Commissioning Editor – Rajiv Mehrotra, PSBT India. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyXh\\_5dT0zw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyXh_5dT0zw) (accessed April 5, 2019).