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Your Hands. Extended: Performing Embodied Knowledge in Eastern Martial Arts

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Chaim Noy

Sensei claps his hands and calls "hai douzo!", and it is as if I woke up from a daydream, though I wasn't daydreaming. I'm sitting seiza (traditional Japanese kneeling posture) in an aikidō seminar taking place in Jerusalem. In the large mirror, which is installed on the opposite wall, I can see my friends sitting near me in a row that extends to my left and to my right. At the center of the hall, sensei is demonstrating a technique. We observe his physical movements closely, while at the same time we also follow his verbal explanations. Yelena, my colleague and student, is assisting him: as she attacks he performs the correct defensive set of movements. Sometimes his movements with Yelena strike me as so aesthetic, so beautiful, that I become emotional and my eyes become wet. "Hai douzo!" is a cue: we quickly rise from seiza and pair-up. Now it is for us to perform the technique that sensei has taught, attempting to do so as effortlessly and as perfectly as he has.

In this paper I inquire into knowledge as a social, embodied and interactional accomplishment. Following phenomenological and interactional theories, I address knowledge not as an abstract notion that exists over and above felt experience and feeling persons, but as felt/sensed and situational action. Interactional studies and theories in particular (Dewey; Garfinkel; Goffman) have stressed not only how inspiring it can be to think *with* the body, rather than *about* it or perhaps without it altogether, but also how society and *the social* are interactional through and through. Further along these lines, social life is seen as essentially (re)assembled (Latour *Reassembling*), and is continuously (re)created in and through interconnected interactions.

Many social theories of the twentieth century are of static nature. If Popperian science sought to 'capture', 'isolate' and 'fix' reality, even momentarily, in order to examine it in a laboratory (be it concrete or metaphorical), emerging mobile and non-representational sensibilities suggest that it is social science that should adapt rather than social life. The notion of *mobilities* for instance, rests on an approach "which is not limited to representational thinking and feeling, but a different sort of thinking-feeling altogether. It is a recognition that mobilities such as dance involve various combinations of thought, action, feeling and articulation" (Adey 149). Thrift's non-representational theory too asks social science to move beyond the representational order and beyond acts of 'interpretation' of 'reality-as-text', and inquire instead into "skills and knowledges [people] get from being embodied beings" (Thrift 127).

Latour appealingly suggests that, "to have a body *is to learn to be affected*, meaning 'effectuated', moved, put into motion by other entities" (*How to Talk* 205). The question then is how the body becomes what it knows, and how and where such skill-ful learning takes place, where, together, bodies learn to sense each other and interact in innovative ways, performing new somatic knowledges, sensitivities, and interactions. I use the

notion of a *kinesthetic community of practice* to address these questions, and to inquire into the (inter-)somatic environments where knowledge is both embodied and performed. I suggest that somatic knowledge is gained within a community, whereby “[a]cquiring a body is thus a progressive enterprise that produces at once a sensory medium *and* a sensitive world” (Latour, *How to Talk* 207), can be observed in an instructive way. The point here is not only the social nature of knowledge, but also its somatic and performed nature; “The action of knowledge”, as Latour (Latour, *How to Talk* 214) puts it. With the performative turn, to which I wish to contribute, I contend that we find ourselves less in times of hermeneutics of interpretation, and more in times of intervention and performance.

For the purpose of studying a *community of kinesthetic practice*, I reflect on an occasion of aikidō training, which took place during a seminar given by Doug Wedell sensei during June, 2010, in Jerusalem. More generally, Aikidō is a modern Japanese martial art, which was developed by Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969) during the 1920s and 1930s. The term’s meaning resides in the kanji: Ai (合) meaning blending or harmonizing; Ki (氣) meaning spirit, vitality or energy; and Dō (道) meaning way and also ‘discipline of’ or ‘art of’. Hence literally the meaning of aikidō, which is told to newcomers and reiterated to experienced aikidōka (practitioners), is the way of blending and harmonizing with the energy. Indeed, aikidōka view accomplishing the state of aiki, or of “being (one) with” not as a means but as an ends; a case of perfect time and movement, the performance of which means that aggression and risk, pain and injury, have been avoided.

Research into bodies and mobilities in aikidō is part of the larger inquiry into systems of embodiment in and of Eastern bodily arts and of course other systems of movements and mobilities. My personal association here concerns practicing aikidō for over two decades, mostly in the dōjō (training hall and community) affiliated with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Interspersed Embodied Autoethnography

The ethnographic text below is what I call an *interspersed autoethnography*, referring to two points that characterize it as a research method. First, it is an autoethnographic text as it is composed from my own embodied and emotional perspective, as an experienced aikidō practitioner or aikidōka. It is not a typical ‘participant observation’ description because my aikidō practice is deeply personal and has commenced a few years before my practice in academic disciplines began. Articulating my aikidō practice is necessarily for me a personal matter, touching on meaningful social and spiritual nexuses. In doing so my pleasure is twofold, as I am able to bring together my aikidō and my academic life-spheres.

Second, the term *interspersed* describes a reluctance on my behalf to write in a straightforward, seemingly unproblematic, ethnographic genre. While I am completely in accord with works which decenter positivistic scientific writing and offer reflexivity and personal voice (eg. Young), I nonetheless acknowledge the strong claim for authenticity made at times by neat ethnographic extracts ‘from the field’. My preference is for a hybrid text that conveys experience and bodily praxis as they unfold, allowing the interspersing of real-life activity with academic reflection. Such autoethnographic writing is a hybrid genre, simultaneously de- or re-contextualizing academic knowledge and illuminating it via my practice/knowledge of aikidō.

Writing in the personal voice of the researcher’s body, and sense of embodiedness, has of

course its own history within and outside academic communities. In the type of research produced by colleagues who work on bodily practices and somatic communities, addressing one's own body is inevitable. The more recent voices in this tradition remind us that "[s]ocial scientists who have gotten deeply involved in kinesthetic cultures have discovered they can analyze cultural information recorded in their own bodies" (Samudra 667). The interspersed embodied autoethnography offered in this paper aims to do just that, to share an embodied experience of actual aikidō training.

Your Hands. Extended.

Now Doug Wedell sensei slightly bows in my direction, and I, sitting *seiza*, immediately bow back and run to assist him. He faces me and extends both of his hands forward slightly. This marks for me an invitation. It is an opening, a cue marking that something is (already) going on between us. When Doug sensei raises his hands slightly and extends both of them forward a tension is established, and now it is my turn: I rush in the direction of his hands, seeking to grab both of them with mine. The grab is a type of an attack called *ryotedori* (lit. in Japanese 'two-hand-grab'). My hands are extended as my body moves forward, focusing on grabbing Doug's extended arms powerfully.

I would have liked at this point to write that I am experiencing a 'Zen state of mind' and that my mind is clear of thoughts, and there are no words humming in me; or that I am experiencing a sensation of 'flow'. But, alas, the fact is that I *am* thinking, and quite intensely. More accurately, I am speculating and wondering what will happen to me/my body as my arms approach sensei's extended arms. Surely, I will not be able to grab his hands, and before physical contact between our limbs will materialize, he will move away swiftly and evade my approach.

In terms of the discourse of the Martial Arts, I'm thinking about the *technique* that Doug sensei might perform with/on me, which will shape our expected embodied interaction. Not so much thinking as sensing: I imagine embodied possible trajectories that might span out from when and where our hands will nearly touch. As I rush in sensei's direction I'm also aware of my breathing and sweating (both seem too heavy to me, and I repeatedly remind myself that I need to work out more often), of the coolness of the *tatami* (mattresses) under my feet, and somewhere in the back of my mind I'm concerned that I haven't arranged my white training shirt (the thick training wear called *gi*) tidily enough. I'm also registering an anxiety. It has to do with the possible consequences of the technique that he will execute: will it be painful? Will I be hurt? Do I know that technique? Will I perform competently when he executes it? (I wouldn't want to disappoint him, and in addition there are people watching us). Once, in a seminar in another style of aikidō, the Sensei smacked me on the *tatami* so powerfully and painfully that my eyes immediately filled with tears, but I bowed and said "domo arigato Sensei!" ("thank you very much, teacher"). Storming at

Doug sensei, then, is not without words and many sensations, it is the easy part of this tango; the unexpected moments are very brief and amount to the actual duration of the performance of the technique.

In this demonstration, Doug sensei is *nagè* or the one who performs the technique. In the capacity of teaching a technique, defined as a series of interactional moves that affects the attacker and neutralizes the threat embodied in the attack, *nagè* is the one exhibiting the technique for students and others to see and learn (which in the martial arts essentially means to try to repeat and imitate). Everyone's eyes are set on *nagè*, sometimes with a technical gaze that seeks to unravel the proficient skills he is demonstrating ("how did he move his legs, did you get that? That was subtle!"), and sometimes with an impressionistic gaze that is inspired with his mastery of Ki, and how he connects and blends so effortlessly and effectively with the *uke*, who is presently myself ("wow, you can really see the Ki").

In aikidō, *uke's* role – which I am now embodying – is mainly helping *nagè* perform the technique correctly, and in the case it is also clearly a demonstration. This is done by approaching Doug sensei ('attacking') energetically and effectively. I am generating motility and extending not only my arms and my body in the direction of sensei's arms and body, but I am also 'extending Ki', an intention, an orientation, an invisible energy. Paraphrasing the ethnomethodological dictum "seen but unnoticed" (Garfinkel), for aikidōka Ki is the reverse: *noticed but unseen*. In fact, it is precisely the noticing of and awareness to Ki that makes a person into an aikidōka; into a member of a community of kinesthetic practice.

The notion of community of practice has much more to do with learning in real-life situations and interactions, rather than in classroom contexts where knowledge is commonly presented in an abstracted and decontextualized form. Yet in aikidō training it could be said that "a community of practice is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 464). I add the notion of a *kinesthetic community* of practice to these practices. Following Samudra, I acknowledge that *kinesthetic* sensitivities and sensibilities are essential in and for martial arts in general, and more prominently for aikidō. The practice that defines the community, then, has to do with developing and enhancing kinesthetic sensitivities.

Rushing at sensei Doug, I'm imagining what might/will happen to my body and where will it go. *Ryotedori tenchi-nagè* (lit. two-hand-grab heaven-and-earth-through) engulfs one possibility, whereby sensei will side-step a little and then raise one hand and lower the other – a movement which will have a particular effect on my body: my feet will be in the air, my body will be more or less horizontal to the tatami, and I will then fall and land on my back. Or he might do a *ryotedori enkei-nagè* (two-hand-grab circular-throw), whereby he will side-step and then quickly lower and raise his body in a graceful yet abrupt dipping movement, while performing a vertical circular motion with his hands. In this case my body will rhythmically follow his body's movements, bend and straighten a little and finally bend again beyond my ability to maintain stability. At this point I will lose

my balance and fall, either forward or backward, depending on the fleeting subtleties of a particular occasion. Or sensei might choose to do *ryotedori irimi-nagè* (two-hand-grab forward-thrust), or *ryotedori shiho-nagè* (two-hand-grab four-directions-throw), which is one of his favorites and one of my most dreaded techniques...

My mind is conjuring these associations of names and movements, of techniques and somatic trajectories. Which are now coupled. There is nothing more that I can do about all of this at this stage, besides what I am already doing, which is storming at Doug sensei and committing an "attack", not allowing my hesitations, anxieties and visualizations to interfere or distract my motility. I know that regardless of the specific technique that he will eventually perform, I will not be able to actually capture his hands, and it is precisely this time-space interval which is the creative opportunity for *nagè* to execute the technique at the ideal timing. He will begin the technique just before I capture his hands. Not too far or too early; not close or too late. In precisely the right time. What is left for me now to do as *uke*-in-interaction is to allow my body to be centered and relaxed; try to keep my body attentive and reactive and least rigid as possible, which are the somatic-kinesthetic qualities that *ukemi* – doing *uke* – demands (to my understanding).

Indeed, as I close in on sensei's hands, about a foot away or so, at the exact point where I cannot anymore retract my movement, he begins moving. He slides unnoticingly sideways and his hands do a similar motion to that of *tenchi-nagè*, but not precisely. It's a different technique: I think it's *ryotedori zepo-nagè* (two-hand-grab forward-throw). His sidestepping draws my body low and near his body quickly and powerfully. I'm inside a whirlpool and now really do not have time to ponder or simulate trajectories. There is a split of a second there that the air is drawn out of my lungs. My hands follow sensei's hands attentively, and my body stays 'with' my hands, connected to his movements.

Everyone is observing sensei; the *nagè*. The *uke* is perceived as a helper; a sideshow. Yet my skills are developed and subtle, and as *nagè* performs various movements swiftly and minutely, my limbs and body must reflect these movements in a *highly attuned manner*. My movements are as swift and minute as his. Otherwise, the connection will be asynchronous and *uke* will fail to follow or be engaged by *nagè's* technique. *Uke's* embodied abilities (acquired skills) at following through *nagè's* leads allows *uke's* body to move in a fashion that reflects *nagè's* movements in a magnified way. Observers' correct gaze then should not be set only or even primarily on *Nagè*, the 'performer'; it should include the *uke*, which supplies a type of an embodied mirror to or echo of *nagè's* movements. I identify with Samudra's (671) observation, that "[k]nowing the structure of movement is not the same as experiencing the sensation of movement, however. After more than two decades of training, I know when I am executing a *besi* correctly: not by the shape of the form but by subtle sensations."

Uke is attending to *nagè*. It is less a matter of attacking the *nagè*, if attack is taken simplistically to mean striking/kicking/grabbing the other. More dialectical and interactional, in the *nagè-uke* dyad the *uke* supplies the gesture of the audience. *Uke* audiences *nagè* – the latter must appreciate (must have acquired the sensitivities and the 'taste' to appreciate) *nagè*, hence to audience *nagè* and complement her. If we take the notion of audience not as a passive receptor, but as an active, committed and engaged actor, then *uke* is an active and involved audience. This is how art is consumed, and indeed at stake here is a martial art.

The next thing I feel are a variety of sensations, taking place more or less at the same time in different bodily parts, both at the skin level and inside the body. Then my body is suspended in mid-air: two feet up in the air and for a distance of some nine feet. Thanks to Doug sensei I'm micro-flying. This is the last part performed by *uke*: after the attack and after *nagè* has performed the technique, *uke* must make sure that she or he are unharmed while taking the appropriate fall. Relieved, I land softly on the tatami.

Conclusions

I could have concluded by saying that as it takes two to tango, it also takes two to perform an aikidō technique. But this would have been an over-simplification. It takes two roles to perform a technique, that of the *nagè* and that of the *uke*, and in addition it also takes a community of kinesthetic practice in order to learn to perform 'doing being a *nagè*' and also 'doing being a *uke*' (following Garfinkel). It might take two to tango but it takes more (inter)connections and more (inter)actions to learn to tango. Moreover, it is never completely clear, nor can it ever be, whether the occasion at hand is that of learning (training, rehearsing) or that of performing (accomplishing). When I rush at Doug sensei during a seminar class, it seems like a performance: students and others are watching and taking pictures, and the seminar is video-recorded and then uploaded to YouTube and to our websites. But at the same time I am also thinking of the practice I gained with 'doing being a *uke* for/with Doug Sensei'. So any performance is also a training session, a rehearsal for an occasion that is known or unknown but nonetheless anticipated. And of course vice versa: every training session or rehearsal is also a performance; an aesthetic and meaningful interaction that stands for itself. In these occasions, kinesthetic and somatic knowledge is simultaneously created, shared, and performed, as are also the sensitivities and sensibilities that are acquired and required in order to reciprocate it; to 'understand it' via mobilities.

With the interspersed autoethnography presented I have sought to show how, in Latour's terms, the body learns to be affected with and to the *uke* in the *uke-nagè* dyad in aikidō. The skills and sensitivities in and of aikidō are learned through the roles performed during actual practice. What is called 'the work of the *uke*', or *ukemi*, is an ongoing process of acquiring and refining skills in and for interaction.

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