



Embodied and Sensorial Methodologies for Researching Performance: Kinesthetic Empathy

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This video article shows some of the embodied methodologies during fieldwork researching the corporeal practices by Catalanian artist Fina Miralles (b.1950). I made use of my own performances, Feldenkrais and 5Rhythms dance; re-create some performances in the sites that took place, extensive archival work, film during fieldwork, and conversations with the artist and curatorial practices. This research-creation process provides a genuine tool to develop a corporeal methodology focused on kinesthesia and kinesthetic empathy.

Keywords: kinesthetic empathy; corporeal agency; research-creation



VIDEO ARTICLE

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[0:12]

Embodied and Sensorial Methodologies for Researching Performance: Kinesthetic Empathy

by Celia Vara

2024

[Celia Vara:]

The Catalan artist Fina Miralles during the late years of the Franco dictatorship (1936–75) was one of the only women working on performance art. She was unique because she focused on the body as an agent of liberation and self-expression under the acute restrictions on feminine bodies during this period. She had a prominent role within the Catalan conceptual art.

(Sabadell, Catalonia, 1950)

(Vara, 2019b, 2022a, 2022b, 2023b)

What might feminist political action look like when it is not overtly revolutionary, or even public? How does this kind of political action value the body as a site for personal and political kinds of learning? What kind of knowledge do such corporeal practices produce?

In the process of this research I asked myself: How can I engage with corporeal work? How can my methodology be coherent with a research question that centres on corporeal dynamics? Could I develop a tactile and corporeal sense of her practice in and through my research?

In this video article I share some perceptual experiences during my research-creation process that provided a genuine tool to develop an embodied methodology

(Spatz, 2017)

focused on kinesthetic empathy, to argue that the sense of our body position and movement is related to our awareness of the space we occupy, that is kinesthesia

(Noland, 2008; Smith, 2023).

Kinesthetic empathy can engage in and with another's movement or sensorial experience of movement

(Sklar, 1991, 1994; Reynolds & Reason, 2012)

That allows experimentation and creation of new bodily routines and, therefore, a form of corporeal agency.

My analysis of Fina Miralles's early works proceeded in an embodied manner. It was during my daily and art life that I had corporeal insights about the artist's dynamics. For instance, during one of my own bodywork Feldenkrais sessions with psychologist Suzanne Charbonneau or 5th Rhythms Dance with dancer Erik Iversen. These body movements were tools to found corporeally the consciousness of the sense of kinesthesia. We take this sense for granted but it is there in order to make us feel the volume, borders, space and sensations within the body.

What am I in this body? This body is me. How can I challenge and reflect the way I am within myself and in relation with the world? These experiences in my body allowed me to analyze the corporeal presence in performance from the perspective of these questions and sensations.

The still body and the way it moves put us in contact with the constant changes of this stillness and movement, and augments the awareness of the bodily consciousness, processes and transformation. It is precisely through movement (and thus kinesthesia) that the body engages its surroundings to gather knowledge about itself and the world and intervene in it.

My work is grounded in situated knowledge

(Haraway, 1988)

which includes my background as a psychologist and artist, and my condition as a Spanish woman born in the last year of Francoism

(1939–1975):

I grew up in post-Francoism, and was formed by its effects and afterlives. This conditions my research-creation practice and, in fact, my approach to corporeal emancipatory possibilities.

My research-creation methodology included different practices: coding through grounded theory, extensive archival work in Spain, filmed encounters and conversations, curation of her filmed performances and embodied workshops with what I call the kinesthetic method.

(Charmaz, 2014)

(Vara, 2022d)

(Miralles, 2015–2018, Vara, 2019b)

(Vara 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2021, 2022c, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c)

[05:58]

The Return

Fina Miralles was waiting for me in the Figueres train station when we met for first time. In this one day encounter she brought me a few things: this image in a big poster and her autobiography *Testament Vital*.

(Living Will)

On the way back to Barcelona the same day, with the emotion of our first encounter, I forgot the poster on the train platform. I phoned the next day and they had kept the image in the office of “lost objects.” Six months later when I travelled for a longer visit to her I recuperated the poster. This “lost object” turns to be one of the key performances I re-perform. On July 2016, I travelled to Les Escaules with Joan Casellas, the photographer of this performance.

He walked with me to the location where *El Retorn* was performed in 2012: a natural spring in the mountains. In this same place where Fina Miralles performed I recreated the piece. My interest was to experience what a body feels relating with the water in order to understand through somatic sensations what it could mean to put the body in relation with that element, and to make subtle movements that allow the water to go over the borders of the body.

Dance ethnologist and performance scholar Deidre Sklar explains:

“Based on the hypothesis that movement embodied cultural knowledge, I had discovered that to ‘move with’ people whose experience I was trying to understand was

a way to also ‘feel with’ them, providing an opening into the kind of cultural knowledge that is not available through words or observation alone”. (Sklar 1994: 11).

As a research-creation method, the recreation of Fina Miralles performances was a particular manner for unpacking my research questions: How can I engage with her bodywork? How can my methodology be coherent with a research question that centres on corporeal movement? Could I develop a tactile and corporeal sense of her practice in and through my research?

[10:32]

Talking With Fina Miralles

The first time I met Fina Miralles (2015) she explained the importance of visual images and movement for her personal process. She told me that at the end of the 1970s she suffered a very intense personal crisis.

She did not feel her body and she did not have the strength to exist. Her mind built an image of this state: it was as if she had a wall behind her and a cliff in front of her.

A voice inside said: Jump! She said: ‘I thought I was going to die but I jumped, I survived and I really started to live, to be in my body’. I remember hearing this story in this encounter with Fina Miralles as an intense experience; it was as if I was witnessing a performance.

[Imperceptible conversation, laughter]

While this was a command that the artist gave to herself, it was also experienced as an imperative to me. I remember feeling in my body the sensations of almost preparing to jump. In hearing the statement ‘Jump!’, I couldn’t help but brace my body to take a leap. It was then when our relationship started.

During my fieldwork, I travelled to the town where Fina Miralles now lives: Cadaqués. It is a little town situated on the coast of Girona, Catalonia, in the Cap de Creus.

The night before I got there, I dreamt I was driving up to a big mountain with endless curves. This was my first time in Cadaqués and this is in fact the only way to access it, except in a ship from the sea —

[Fina Miralles:]

Caminant, caminant
Vas arribar per aquí

Walking, walking
 You arrive here.

— going up in an endless curving route and going down to the white town by the sea. I was nervous to meet Fina Miralles again after our only conversation six months prior.

[Fina Miralles:]

I es molt maco banyarse....
Están en aquesta banda
Tu mira para allá y mira para acá
Ohhhh

And it's very nice to bathe...
 They are in this side
 You look there and look here
 Ohhhh

[13: 38]

To Speak of Movement

“To speak of movement as a way of knowing
 implies that the way people move
 is as much a clue to who they are as the way they speak.

Movement knowledge
 is conceptual and emotional
 as well as kinesthetic

Where do I belong in the world?
 How do human beings behave?
 Where do I come from and whom do I go through life?
 What do I value?

The concrete and sensory bodily aspects of social life
 provide the glue that holds world views and cosmologies,
 value and political convictions, together”. (Sklar 1994)

[16:05]

Five Paths Like the Starfish

[Fina Miralles:]

Dec a la vida, la força del blat

Des de la espiga, al gra germinat

I a la pluja, aigua celestial

Que crea caverns, i engendra cristalls

Tan generosa, em dóna en la mà

Amb cinc camins, com l'estrella de mar

La llum ilumina, un somni fugaç

Cavall que vola, capa el sol daurat

I el somriure, dels nens infants

Sentir-ho vosaltres, el so primordial

La llum il.lumina, un somni fugaç

Cavall que vola, cap el sol daurat...

[laughter]

I owe to life, the strength of wheat

From the spike, to the sprouted grain

And to the rain, heavenly water

That creates caves, and it spawns crystals

So generous, she gives me her hand

With five paths, like the starfish

Light illuminates a fleeting dream

Flying horse, cloak the golden sun

And the smile of children

You hear the primordial sound

Light illuminates a fleeting dream

Flying horse, cloak the golden sun...

[laughter]

[17:13]

The Past is the Present

[Imperceptible conversations between Celia Vara and Fina Miralles. Sound of seagulls, wind, birds and waves, and super 8 film sound.]

[Fina Miralles:]

Vale. Aixó de suru, de corcho

I sobra, I vaig posar

Jo vaig retallar gomaespuma, gomaespuma

Como todo esto, como todo esto

Y en la otra

La otra em va costar una miqueta mes

L'otra vaig posar

Aixó

Més petitó

Okay That of cork, of cork

And on that..., I put...

I cut foam rubber, foam rubber

Like all this, like all this

And in the other

The other cost me a little bit more

In the other I put

This

Smaller

[Sound of wind, metallic vane of Cape of Crosses and Fina Miralles steps, and super 8 film sound]

[Fina Miralles:]

Mira un barquet allà al fondo...

Look, a boat over there in the background...

[19:30]

Key words: Kinesthesia, Kinesthetic Empathy, Corporeal Agency, Research-Creation, Embodied Methodology

Abstract

This video article shows some of the embodied methodologies during fieldwork researching the corporeal practices by Catalanian artist Fina Miralles (b.1950). I made use of my own performances, Feldenkrais and 5Rhythms dance; re-create some performances in the sites that took place, extensive archival work, film during fieldwork, and conversations with the artist and curatorial practices. This research-creation process provides a genuine tool to develop a corporeal methodology focused on kinesthesia and kinesthetic empathy.

Camera

Ivó Vinuesa

Celia Vara

Archives

Museu d'Art de Sabadell (Extracts from video performances by Fina Miralles in this order in chapter "El Passat es el Present": *Fenòmens Atmosfèrics* [Atmospherical Phenomena], 1973; *Duna* [Dune], 1973; *Deixada anar de cargols* [Liberating snails] 1973, and *Petjades* [Traces], 1976.

Arxiu Aire, Joan Casellas (Photographs in chapter "The Return" in this order: Fina Miralles performing *El Retorn*, 2012 and Celia Vara re-performing *El Retorn*, 2016)

Biography

Celia Vara is a postdoctoral fellow at the Moving Image Research Lab (MIRL) at McGill University (Montreal, Quebec, Canada). She holds a Ph.D. in Communication (2019) at Concordia University (Montreal, Quebec, Canada).

She is a psychologist since 1997, and her master thesis ("Feminist Video Art in the 70's in Spain") won in 2013 the 1st Prize-Award in Gender and Research by Jaume I University in Spain.

She is a visual artist and curator. Her writings and media work have appeared in *Journal of Feminist Studies*, *Institute for Research on Women* (Rutgers University), *McGraw Hill Editorial*, *Art and Politics*, *humanities and entropy* (MPDI Switzerland), and *Performance Research* (Routledge Journal, Taylor and Francis).

She explores kinesthesia, movement, kinesthetic empathy and the use of sensorial body in 1970s feminist performance art and its relations with corporeal agency and feminist resistance in the current cultural and political context.

Her research interests include corporeal processes of consciousness, perception and agency, and embodied research-creation methodologies.

<https://www.mcgill.ca/english/staff/celia-vara>

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