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## **Editorial: Bodily Undoing: somatics as practices of critique**

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This special issue of *JDSP* aims to address the socially and culturally transformative potential of Somatics and somatic-informed performance practices. The transdisciplinary discourse of dance and somatic practices has moved beyond the state of merely identifying the field. The editors of this volume recognize somatic practices as processes of undoing existing patterns so that new ones can emerge. How can this undoing be extended beyond the body of the individual to the body politic or the social body? How might we construct Somatics as practices of critique that might contribute to an alternative social imaginary? Can somatic practices foster a capacity for self-reflection and criticality as feature of the ‘democratic citizen’ (Morin 1999) within growing totalitarian sociocultural contexts?<sup>1</sup>

Glenna Batson (2017) argues towards the need for a new critique to fully address Somatics in the face of the polycrisis of neo-liberal globalization.<sup>2</sup> If we understand the potential for undoing as processes of putting into question or putting into crisis, as practices of critique or critical practices, how does the field of somatic practices engage with auto-critique or critical self-reflection? Isabelle Ginot (2010) points us to the problem that within endogenous and self-referential somatic discourses, notions of ‘belief’ tend to override critical scholarship or practice. While Ginot proposes that somatic discourses tend draw on science to promote a ‘form of homogeneous, non-historicized, almost eternal truth’ (2010: 15) that excludes cultural variations or the body-politic, she also points towards the possibility or need to ‘investigate and construct somatic practices as practices of empowerment’ (Ginot 2011: 5).

Rather than producing a unifying orthodoxy in belief that somatic practices ‘are by nature empowering practices’ (Ginot 2011 4) this volume aims to honour, articulate and enhance traces of critical thought and practice that emerge from historical contemporary and personal voices relevant to the field.

The editors also recognize the problematic historical Euro-centric nature of the Dance/Somatic nexus, that shares its roots as a ‘clean’ practice with western early Modernist Cultures.<sup>3</sup> While Modernist ‘Reform’-gymnastics proposed proto-somatic practices as counter-culture concerned with de-culturing and re-culturing the self-directed, emancipated and ‘universally’ liberated western body (Weaver 2009), writings by key proponents (Alexander [1910] 1946; Duncan 1927; Laban 1935; Mensendieck [1906] 1929) reveal eugenic and racist dimensions that are rooted in mastery, domination, selection and exclusion.<sup>4</sup> If we attend to our problematic history critically, does this help us understand the whiteness of our contemporary field? Do we need to reflect further critically inwards, before we can make claims towards a transformative or politically empowering Social Somatics?

Somatic pioneers including Bess Mensendieck (see articles ‘Entangled histories’) or Moshe Feldenkrais (1992, 2010) directly articulated their concerns towards the repressive effects of culture on the embodiment of self, and also speculated on the impact of processes of undoing, de-culturing, or un-conditioning on the social field. Biologist Aharon Katzir recalls discussions with Moshe Feldenkrais during the 1970s on developing practices that foster

a free awareness that enables the critical and free operation [...] we can think of this as a process of de-conditioning – that is to say, ‘un-conditioning’. And then we talked about culture, which is stipulated by the possibility of conditioning. (in Feldenkrais 2010: 173)

Can we understand such process of un-conditioning as an act of embodied resistance, part of what Herbert Marcuse coined 'The Great Refusal' ([1964] 2007)? Post-Marxist thinker Marcuse called for a reflective inward looking of the individual, as a critical and agency forming act of resistance within a growing consumer capitalist society after World War II. He suggests that

with the affirmation of the inwardness of subjectivity, the individual steps out of the network of exchange relationships and exchange values, withdraws from the reality of bourgeois society, and enters another dimension of existence [...] as a counterforce against aggressive and exploitative socialization. ([1964] 2007: 69)

The writing of British Anarchist writer and educator Rhiannon Firth (2016) is exemplary for a discourse outside of the somatic/dance nexus which draws on somatic pedagogies and practices in dialogue with critical theory to construct contemporary forms of thinking about political activism and critical education as acts of resistance against 'a de-politicized culture [that] undermines capacity for collective social action' (Firth 2016: 12). Firth suggests that the contemporary neo-liberal state constructs dominant, oppressive and embodied 'discourses of affect' that 'harness bio-power to produce compliant subjects able to deal with (or, unable to look beyond) neoliberal precarity and anxiety' (Firth 2016). Critiquing post-structural theory and developments in Affect Theory she proposes 'understanding the body as a utopian site of resistance [...] where oppression, inequality and affective control are played out, felt

and embodied' (Firth 2016: 128), and where individual and collective alternative imaginaries can be questioned, rehearsed and constructed. Firth points to the trans-European Nanopolitics Group and their recent publication *the Nanopolitics Handbook* (Plotegher, Zechner, & Rübner Hanse [The Nanopolitics Group] 2013)<sup>5</sup> as an example of contemporary form of collective enquiry into the role of embodiment in political activism. The Nanopolitics Group asks questions concerned with the lived, moving, slowed down, de-individualized, relational and caring body as 'a question of self-care, of resistant autopoiesis' (2013: 27):

[t]he body is active-political, it moves, pulls other bodies along, it is capable of affecting and being affected. Yet, this is equally a terrain of struggle as the body is rendered hyper-active. Neoliberal capitalism desperately needs 'liberated' bodies that are 'creative', flexible and productive – these are bodies that are ready to cope with the unforeseeable, with risk, stress, danger. How then, to reactivate, politicise and de-traumatise these struggles, and how to de-individualise the defeats and conformism our bodies have suffered? How to free the body from the repression of waged labour? How to open up our vulnerabilities to each other, in ways that can counter both the threats to the stability of our selves and the pressure of having to be and perform as (working) supermen and wonder-women? [...] How are our bodies engaged and produced in current struggles? [...] Can an undoing and reshaping of our bodies have an impact on an undoing and reshaping of our subjectivities and of our institutions? [...] How can we learn to support, sustain and take care of each other? (2013: 25–28)

The work of the Nanopolitics Group reflects a growing concern towards extending the field to articulate and probe new disciplines that integrate social critique with embodiment and application of practices in non-traditional and non-privileged contexts. Nicole Anderson's quest to formulate 'Critical Somatics'(2008),<sup>6</sup> collective endeavours in the United States, Europe and Australia to articulate 'Eco-Somatics' (Bauer 2008; McHugh 2016, Olsen 2002), a growing discussion within the Contact Improvisation community<sup>8</sup> on body-politics, sexuality, gender equality and collective creativity (Hennessy 2008, Little 2016, Pourian 2015), run parallel to developments towards a 'Social Somatics' (Giorgi 2015, Eddy 2010) as a form of educational activism that questions inherent elitism within the field and seeks to find new ways of inclusion and accessibility 'in world interchange' (Eddy 2010). Extending from the somatic-activist model developed through the Moving On Center – The School of Participatory Arts and Research in the United States and more recently in Berlin (Eddy 2010), more recent organizations in the United States and in Europe are aiming to develop models of practice and training programmes to honour 'the lineage and further develop the Somatics field so that it may expand and become more inclusive, accessible, and relevant to communities that have not historically been invited to contribute to or participate in the work'.<sup>9</sup>

Gathering a faculty of facilitators from diverse cultural, age, gender and ability backgrounds organizations such as Generativesomatics- Social Transformation and Social Justice aim to use Somatics as a tool for

a deeper understanding of social change and collective transformation. We see that it has the potential to be a transformative praxis for individuals and groups working to change relations of power in the world. We believe that a collective

use of somatics can increase the holistic effectiveness and impact of community organizing and movement building.<sup>10</sup>

The Institute for Somatics and Social Justice, directed by activist/ dance artist Nicole Bindler (see article ‘Clitoral embodiment’) and launched in 2017 aims to locate Somatics as a form of activism within an anti-oppression framework. The institute takes a critical stance towards elitism, Euro-centrism and under-theorization historically associated with the field. Their mission statement suggests that

the Somatics field is populated by predominantly white, financially privileged, able-bodied practitioners. As a result, Somatic practices risk claiming universality of embodied experience. *The Institute for Somatics and Social Justice* addresses this field-wide limitation by grounding Somatic research in the context of our total society and affirming Somatics as a tool for personal growth AND dismantling racism, misogyny, queerphobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism, and class-based oppression.<sup>11</sup>

Somatische Akademie Berlin (SAB) in Germany has established itself as European hub for extended somatic enquiry and independent training. Drawing partially on traditions of European Modernist Reform ‘Leib’-pedagogies,<sup>12</sup> SAB is concerned with facilitating ‘bodily self-perception (Leib), cultivating a dialogue between self, society and nature’, where lived body is understood as a primary and utopian place of learning – ‘our first academy’.<sup>13</sup> Tracing somatic practices back to early twentieth century northern European Gymnastics, Youth and Nudist cultures between the two world wars, their mission statement raises an

awareness of the controversial histories and ideals of emancipatory and politicized body-cultures which fluidly embraced democratic and fascist social order alike.

Elsa Gindler, one of the founders of *Leib-* and breath–pedagogy, worked with such ideals just like Leni Riefenstahl who scenically activated these in her films. The seemingly small difference between the playful movement with released musculature as found within the *Leibpädagogik*, and the tight, overstretched deportment as displayed in national-socialist movies makes here a difference concerning the whole.<sup>14</sup>

Acknowledging the complexities of the body-politic SAB has been running yearly festivals that address socio-political questions and contexts under the title Body IQ Festival since 2015 (see also article by Katia Munker). The 2017 festival asks questions regarding ‘embodied democracy’, ‘democratic bodies’ and ‘democratic participation’ through workshops, lecture series and debate.<sup>15</sup>

The series of articles and essays in this volume addresses a diverse range of topics, problems and approaches towards critical practice within an extended field of Somatic activism. The authors refer to relevant personal experience, artistic practice, or pedagogical and organizational processes that invite critical and theoretical contextualization.

Carolyn Roy’s article ‘Celebrate and demonstrate: Radical politics in somatic practices’ offers artist reflections and theoretical considerations on a choreographic project proposing an alliance between dancers and workers as part of the London May Day Rally, 2016. Roy aims ‘to generate reflection on the political potential of somatically informed dance and



performance practices’, and suggests that ‘in the context of popular demonstrations against social inequality and injustice [...] the possibility emerges that somatic practice might participate in a profound shift of our understanding and enactment of politics’. Roy’s text exposes ideas that resonated in the project, primarily philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s ‘being-in-common’, notions of ‘being with’, and ‘copresence’, as examined in Nancy’s essay *Being Singular Plural* (2000). Responding to Isabelle Ginot’s seminal critique of Somatic Discourses towards a construction of a ‘radical epistemology’ and a ‘risking the political’ (2010), Roy asks: ‘How might somatic discourse move away from a path towards orthodoxy, re-engage its radical heritage and engage the bodies that constitute our today’s society? How might somatic practices become recognized as valuable tools for participation in contemporary politics?’

Bríd O’ Farrell’s article ‘Recovery’, ‘Eating *Dys*-order’, and ‘Somatic practice: An auto/ethnographic exploration’ embraces a personal body-politic ‘as a “researcher”, and as a woman living on the borderlines of “eating *dys*-order(s)”’. O’Farrell seeks to contrast experiences lived within the milieu of biomedicine’s ‘culture of diagnosis and treatment’, with those lived within the ‘milieu of the evolving Somatic field’. While drawing on feminist critical discourses on the body, she rejects and resists considerations of bodies constructed as ‘texts’. Resulting theories, she argues, ‘replace medicine’s individualized body with a cultural body, medicine’s disembodied self with a “de-selfed body”’. The author chooses auto-ethnography as a potential means for illuminating and activating relations between corporeal inside and cultural outside, and for ‘allowing what lies beneath the skin, including emotionality, to be expressed’. In her diary-notes O’Farrell critiques the patriarchal specular culture of ‘Body-Image’ ‘treatment’ sessions that utilize visualization, drawings and mirrors as technologies for possible transformation, yet leaving nothing but a ‘blank space’. ‘This blank space’, she reveals,

is unknown and unknowable to me until I find myself in the playful time spaces of Somatic discourse and practice. [...] Moving and being touched within the milieu of the Somatic field is in many ways a means of filling myself in.

O'Farrell articulates how 'Somatic discourse and practice appropriates and re-combines current increasingly familiar knowledge(s) *about* bodies in order to produce novelty, counter-knowledge and counter-culture *from* bodies'. She describes this as a necessary "'re-occupying" territories, which have been mined, mapped and colonized by the new technologies of the sciences, territories such as embryology, cellular science and, especially in recent years, neuroscience'. O'Farrell describes her encounter with Somatic discourse and practice as a stumbling into a time/space, that has given her 'experiences rather than explanations', and that can offer 'resources with which to come into a relationship with my body which dispenses with the need for its domination and mastery'. O'Farrell articulates her ongoing process of 'recovery' as one in which the eradication of her '*dys-order*' is not the necessary factor.

The necessary factor is rather that my everyday choices now, are filtered through such vivid experiences of body as subject, that the life needs of the body that I relate to, through, and with, come more and more to be palpable, acknowledged and trusted.

Drawing on her experience in Body-Mind Centering®, Nicole Bindler's article 'A guide to clitoral embodiment' offers a rationale and working document for movers to explore the embryology of the genitalia from a non-binary perspective. Bindler picks up on the missing

piece of the study of genitalia within her studies of Body-Mind Centering®, and critiques gender representation in physiological studies and somatic practices. Bindler's interest in developing Clitoral Embodiment workshops acknowledges that 'in some people, the genitalia develop as something outside the male/female binary, as is the case with intersex people, and that our subjective experience can differ from our biology, as is often the case with transgender and genderqueer people'. Bindler positions her work as an agency-forming somatic act of resistance against discrimination and intolerance, allowing workshop participants 'to embrace gender ambiguity, inhabit the potential to embody a different sex, deepen awareness of the common origins of male and female forms, and normalize variations of sex and gender experience'. The article illuminates her work through the use of anatomical imagery, practical working scores and participant feedback.

Katja Munker's article 'Body intelligence – individual & social potentiality/emerging thoughts from a festival' gives an insight into the politics and strategies of a somatic arts organization concerned with expanding the field towards social relevance, inclusion and application, and with the body-politic of the democratic individual. Munker gives an overview on the unique place and ethos of SAB, a Berlin based cooperative organization concerned with development and dissemination of somatic practices outside of academic contexts. She sets out SAB's trans-disciplinary aims concerned with the recognition of experiential knowledge and the 'connections between health, psychology, creativity, the social body and politics'. SAB aims to promote 'interdisciplinary and international research, teaching, learning, and everyday practice in this area'. The Body IQ Festivals (2015/16) of SAB, which focused on the articulation of different forms of Social Somatics, form a case study within her article. Drawing partially on the work of Moshe Feldenkrais and current cognitive scholarship, Munker also aims to formulate debate and practical orientation towards a definition of the concept of 'body- intelligence' as a 'condition for the maturation of

cognitive and emotional intelligence’. Munker reflects on the Body IQ 2015 festival panel discussion, debating how a questioning of such body intelligence might form a resource for empathy and compassion within a current climate of socio-political crisis. She argues that through ‘widened range of experience, a tolerance for a wider scope of bodily, spatial and emotional states can be developed [...] Tolerance then becomes an embodied state of multiple possibilities, which can strengthen the ability for coexistence within heterogenic societies’.

In the two-part article ‘Entangled histories: Ecstatic dancing, Carol Brown and Thomas Kampe’ write from their research project ‘Releasing the archive’, a collaboration with dancers of the New Zealand Dance Company (NZDC) concerned with revitalizing the principles and practices of avant-garde choreographer Gertrud Bodenwieser (b.1890 Vienna, d.1959 Sydney). Resisting the archival tradition of preservation, Brown and Kampe instead see their research as generative, releasing ‘processes of rediscovery of world – or worlds’ through the kinaesthetic reverberations of Bodenwieser’s approach.

In the first part of the article entitled ‘Releasing the archive’, Brown explores both the political potency of *somaticizing* Bodenwieser’s practices in the present and the emancipatory force of her work in its original context of 1930’s Vienna. Brown analyses Bodenwieser’s resistance to the dominant discourses of her time; not only through the social commentary implicit in her choreographies but also through the empowered corporeal subjectivities of her dancers. Brown attributes this in part to Bodenwieser’s allegiance to system of gymnastic exercises devised by Bess Mensendieck, who sought to promote the self-determination of women through heightened somatic awareness. Yet Mensendieck’s method was born out of a modernist quest for perfection rife with eugenic undertones and in part 2 of the article, ‘Releasing the de-generate body’, Kampe poses the possibility of circumventing this normative ideology through processes of embodied critique. For Kampe, criticality is a

practice of ‘embodied-self questioning’ and he turns to the Feldenkrais Method as a non-corrective and generally goal-less practice of undoing that can prepare the dancers of NZDC for the ex-centric demands of Bodenwieser’s expression, while simultaneously revitalizing her emancipatory ambitions. Crucially, Kampe makes the case that ‘Releasing the archive’ performs an act of cultural repair; for the embodied criticality of the dancers re-generates Bodenwieser’s forgotten cannon while eschewing discourses of perfection, beauty and absolute truth.

In ‘Soma-conceptual choreographic strategies in Boris Charmatz’s *enfant*’ Antje Hildebrandt uses her descriptive and performative account of Charmatz’s 2011 work to argue that touch-based somatic practices can potently critique social, political and cultural norms. Hildebrandt makes no claim that Charmatz employed somatic practices in his choreographic process, instead she exposes the reader to the affective force of the touch modalities employed by the performers; interactions of vulnerability, trust, care, violence and play at once intensified by and calling into question the accepted boundaries of adult/child relationships. For Hildebrandt, the relational dynamics of touch extend beyond the performers to include herself as audience member and she draws on Garrett Brown (2012) to propose her experience of watching *enfant* as an embodied encounter that transgresses self/other boundaries. Hildebrandt argues that such transgressions reconstitute both individual and social bodies therefore touch engenders somatic reverberations that per se profoundly address conceptual, sociocultural and political issues. Hildebrandt thus not only affirms the critical potential of touch-based somatic practices, but also dissolves yet another presumed boundary: that between conceptual and somatic choreographic practice.

While Hildebrandt's parameters explicitly exclude Charmatz's choreographic process, it is relations within making practices that particularly concern Amanda Hamp. In "Let the freak-fly fly": Somatic approaches to undoing traditional power dynamics in dance-making' Hamp examines the purposive redistribution of power at work in the diverse practices of Miguel Gutierrez, Stephanie Skura and The Architects. For Hamp, as for all the contributors in this issue, it is personal embodied experience of these practices that underscores her argument. Hamp casts the studio as always and already a space of social and political relations that shapes the subjectivities of practitioners. Although quick to point out that somatic practices themselves function as regulatory systems, Hamp explores how explicitly privileging somatic intelligence allows Gutierrez, Skura and The Architects to each disrupt 'the traditional, monarchical choreographer-dancer power dynamic' and in doing so affirm their dancers' creative authority. In each of Hamp's case studies, the explicit foregrounding of kinaesthetic experience allows for a disruption of hierarchical structures in both the teaching and making dimensions of the artists' practice, but the dynamics in each case study are distinct.

In the work of Gutierrez, Hamp identifies 'the kinesthetic as a site and source for vital participation' which leaves 'communal/political/conceptual/imaginational' traces permeating participants' lives beyond the studio. From her experience of Skura's teaching, teacher training and choreographic process Hamp discerns a principle of allowing things to unfurl of their own accord; a practice of 'radical permission' that demands letting go of the past and of the desire to predetermine the future. Rather than asking her dancers to make sense of experience, Hamp sees Skura as cultivating the sensibilities inherent in kinaesthetic ways of knowing. While Skura's approach allows for de/re-subjectivation at its own pace, the group The Architects employ structures of self-organization that effect a shift in authority from the outset. Hamp explains how their practice of Compositional Improvisation invites dancers to enter and leave the dancing space at will, with the choice to stay on the perimeter affecting

the dance as much as a choice to enter. Since dancers are 'in' even when they are 'out' they practice a dual-attentiveness; attending to their own kinaesthetic sensations while simultaneously paying attention to the form of the dance. Hamp argues that this practice of dual-attentiveness 'authorizes composer-performer's choices, and grounds the decision-making process in dancers' somatic intelligence'.

Hamp claims that the ways in which these artists disrupt power relations can reverberate in the social world. She argues that dancers' developed somatic awareness allows for 'poise in the unknown'; sensitizing them to the nuances of situations they encounter. Moreover, as with Hidebrandt's discussion of *enfant* (see above), the traces of their somatic sensitivity extend to the audience, gesturing towards more egalitarian structures for living in this world.

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## Notes

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1

Democracy is more than a political regime, it is the continuous regeneration of a complex retroacting loop: citizens produce the democracy that produces citizens. Unlike democratic societies, which function on the base of individual freedom and responsabilization, authoritarian and totalitarian societies reduce individuals to colonized subjects. In democracy the individual is a citizen, a responsible person with legal status; he enjoys freedom to express his wishes and interests, he accepts responsibility as a member of the body politic. (Morin 1999: 60)

<sup>2</sup> <http://glennabatson.com/>, accessed 28 May 2017. Glenna Batson presented the lecture 'Somatics- an emancipatory education for the future?' together with editor Thomas Kampe at the *Dancefields* conference at Roehampton University, 20 April 2017. This introduction chapter is informed by material and thoughts emerging from this paper.

3

Long-legged strong boys and girls will dance to this music, not the tottering, ape-like convulsions of the Charleston, but a striking upward tremendous mounting, powerful mounting above the pyramids of Egypt, beyond the Parthenon of Greece, an expression of Beauty and Strength such as no civilization has ever known. That will be America dancing. And this dance will have nothing in it either of the servile coquetry of the ballet or the sensual convulsion of the South African negro. It will be clean.

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Isadora Duncan *America Dancing* ([1927] 1983: 265), cited in Copeland and Cohen.

<sup>4</sup> See Alexander ([1910] 1946: 43), cited in <http://lukeford.net/blog/?p=8510>,

[t]he controlling and guiding forces in savage four-footed animals and in the savage black races are practically the same; and this serves to show that from the evolutionary standpoint the mental progress of these races has not kept pace with their physical evolution from the plane of the savage animal to that of the savage human. (Accessed 20 May 2017)

<sup>5</sup> Free download: <http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/nanopolitics-web.pdf>, accessed 22 May 2017.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.scribd.com/document/29805197/Critical-Somatics>.

The main objective of a Critical Somatics discipline is for each student to develop an increased awareness of the relationship between his or her mode of bodily comportment, social and cultural institutions, and the limitations and possibilities for choice and change on both personal and social levels. (Accessed 17 April 2017)

<sup>8</sup> <https://radicalcontact.org/the-experiment-called-contact-improvisation>.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.somaticsandsocialjustice.org/>.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.generativesomatics.org/>.

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<sup>11</sup>See footnote 9.

<sup>12</sup> The German word *Leib* suggests, similarly to contemporary definition of soma, a lived vulnerable agent body. ‘Early 20<sup>th</sup> century “Reform” gymnastics proposed a different approach where the voice of the teacher and external bio-mechanical reasoning was replaced by developing an awareness of the student’s inner rhythms and of the requirements of his organism’ (Weaver 2009).

<sup>13</sup> ‘Die Wahrnehmung des eigenen lebendigen Leibes kultiviert einen Dialog zwischen Selbst, Gesellschaft und Natur’, <http://www.somatische-akademie.de/index.php>, accessed 23 May 2017. Translated from German by the editors.

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Elsa Gindler, eine der Gründerfiguren der deutschen Leib-und Atempädagogik arbeitete mit diesem Ideal genauso wie Leni Riefenstahl, die es in ihren Filmen in Szene setzte. Der scheinbar kleine Unterschied von spielerischer Bewegung mit gelöster Muskulatur in der Leibpädagogik zur strammen, überspannten Haltung in den nationalsozialistischen Filmen macht hier den Unterschied ums Ganze. (Anja Streiter, <http://www.somatische-akademie.de/deutsch/home/geschichte.html>, accessed 23 May 2017)

Translated from German by the editors.

<sup>15</sup> See also: <http://www.bodyiq.berlin/home-de>.