

# 6.1

.CULTURE

Text **Michael Heim**

## KURZFASSUNG

Der Artikel in 5 Sekunden

Moshe Feldenkrais, Jigaro Kano, F.M. Alexander, Mantak Chia, and Thomas Hanna are **pioneers** of contemporary bodywork. Michael Heim discusses their achievements and pins them against the radical body-concept of the Australian artist Stelarc.

**The Australian artist Stelarc and his body extensions. He thinks human beings need a new body**

# bodywork

Freud, Reich, and Jung were the first signs of a breakdown in the wall between mind & body. Contemporary

**R**evolutions come and go. They overturn social, political, and psychological structures. More powerful, however, than revolution is evolution. Evolutionary changes unfold slowly but affect life ineluctably as the living cells of organisms re-organize and adapt to new environments. For humans, evolution means deep adjustments in gut reactions as the species undergoes transformation. Revolutions in politics or morality produce upheavals on the level of consciousness, as we can see from 20th-century history, but shifts in consciousness skate mainly on the thin upper surfaces of the human psyche. Underneath layers of social and cultural accretions there flows a more fundamental ocean of psychophysiology. Here, in the psycho-physiological depths, do the sensitive fingers of contemporary bodywork reach. Names like Freud, Reich, and Jung were merely the first signs of a breakdown in the membranous wall between mind and body. The mutation continues. Consider some of the catalysts who activated 20th-century evolution.

Escaping aboard the last boat from Paris to London in 1940, Moshe Feldenkrais (1904–1984) refused to give up the suitcase entrusted to him at Joliot-Curie's chemical lab. A suitcase containing detailed notes on nuclear fission, plans for an incendiary bomb, and two quarts of heavy water that were la-

ter used in the Manhattan Project to build the first atomic bomb. Along with the suitcase from his work with Nobel prize-winner Frédéric Joliot-Curie, Feldenkrais carried within his physical self an intuitive understanding of the Asian martial arts. As a teenager in Palestine, Feldenkrais learned jiu-jitsu. Later in Paris he studied with Jigaro Kano, the creator of modern Judo. Afterwards Feldenkrais became one of the first Europeans to earn a Black Belt in Judo (1936) and to introduce Judo to the West by founding the Judo Club of Paris and by writing two books on Judo. Throughout his later career as founder of the Feldenkrais Method of bodywork, Feldenkrais drew on the emphatically right-brain, holistic sense of self experienced as a felt organism unified by whole-body energy – the “ki” in Aikido and the “chi” in Tai Chi.

The experience of body energy sensed as a subtle flow through relaxed limbs was developed by Feldenkrais into therapies called “Awareness through Movement” and “Functional Integration.” These healing practices were about educating people in holistic body awareness – as opposed to the Western anatomically objectified body. Feldenkrais could translate his discoveries into Western terms of neuromuscular control and biomechanical efficiency, thereby becoming a synthetic catalyst, an evolutionary vessel combining a new mixture of

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bodywork reaches deep into the psycho-physiological depths of mankind

intuitive body presence with scientific precision. Thousands of healers trained in the Feldenkrais Method spread his cross-cultural breakthroughs. Sitting, standing, walking, and breathing would change for the millions who learned the Method which would in turn infiltrate activities from athletics and theater performance to the treatment of chronic pain.

Another mutational agent hit ground in New York City in 1976 with the arrival of a young Chinese man born in Thailand in 1944. As a youth and teenager, Mantak Chia had learned meditation from Buddhist monks and then studied Taoist energy arts in Hong Kong and Singapore. With total fascination, Chia dedicated his youth to collecting esoteric learning about body energy, a knowledge that remained alive only at the fringes of Communist China. Thousands of years old, this elusive, subtle, and secret information was forbidden during the Communist Revolution. The masters of ancient Taoist transmission had fled mainland China to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Mantak Chia was the young sponge who spent years soaking up the magic elixir. As a young man, he was hired to manage the Asian branch of the Gestetner document company where he learned the Western skill of programming copy machines and office equipment, a skill that was poised at the doorway of the computer revolution. Both

ways of thinking – the right-brain alertness to subtle body phenomena and left-brain logical analysis – came together in Chia as he began systematizing the spiritual content of Asian philosophy, converting its esoteric poetry into Western anatomical charts, clear-stated recipes for step-by-step practice, and maps to provide overviews and goals for a clear system of meditative bodywork. Like Thomas Aquinas, who brought Aristotelian science together with Biblical scripture, Mantak Chia became a cultural catalyst whose journey has profound evolutionary implications. Chia opened his first Healing Tao Center in 1979 in New York's Chinatown. The Center was to grow and expand world-wide through a series of books, workshops, and teacher training programs.

**The influence of the Australian** F.M. Alexander (1869–1955) had prepared the ground for 20th-century revelations like Mantak Chia's Taoist health system but only to a limited degree. The Alexander Method, which was supported by the philosopher John Dewey and Nikolaas Tinbergen (his 1973 Nobel address), focused mainly on posture and usage of the body in motion.

The Taoist emphasis on sexual energy was not part of the Alexander Method. An early pioneer of the life-force as

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expressed in sexual vitality, Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), had died in a U.S. Federal prison for his work on bio-energy. Autogenic training, as developed by Johannes Schultz and Wolfgang Luthe in Germany, could tap into the feelings of flow throughout the nervous system through progressive relaxation, which was expanded into extensive experimental research by Edmund Jacobson (1888–1983) and also by Harvard cardiologist Herbert Benson.

Going beyond these, Mantak Chia saw in Western sexuality something akin to what Schopenhauer saw at the heart of Western culture: excessive yang energy (blind, aggressive life-force) that needed to be recognized at the level of sexuality and then tamed by practices to calm the body-mind through breathing and the absorption of yin receptivity. Likewise, Chia saw a similar need for yin female sexuality to incorporate the forward push of yang energy so as to create balance and harmony. The Healing Tao addresses sexual energy in ways that are unfiltered by the Judaeo-Christian history of body repression. The very terms “sexual energy” and “orgasmic energy” undergo transmutation when put through the Healing Tao system although, of course, immature practitioners often fail to grasp the difference before they are themselves transformed.

The widespread contemporary influence of Taoist practices like the “Inner Smile” and the “Microcosmic Orbit” – in yoga, martial arts, and in many forms of therapy – pay tribute to the evolutionary shift that plumbs the core of body understanding at the level of reproductive powers. Sexual language and expression are placed in an entirely different context, a context of healing and self-maintenance rather than of repression or exploitation. Mantak Chia’s fusion of Asian and Western understanding resonates and deepens the Feldenkrais synthesis of Judo and physical kinesiology.

**To fully describe this evolution** it took the philosopher and writer Thomas Hanna (1928–1990). Hanna’s book “Bodies in Revolt: A Primer in Somatic Thinking” (1970) coined the term “somatics” and placed the history of phenomenological philosophy from Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty in the service of understanding the current body-mind. Hanna later founded the journal *Somatics: Magazine-Journal of the Bodily Arts and Sciences* as well as the Novato (California) Institute for Somatic Research and Training.

By “soma” and “somatics” Hanna meant not “body” but “Me, the bodily being. Not the piece of meat or slab of flesh on the butcher’s block or physiologist’s table, drained of life and ready to be worked upon and used. Soma is living; it is expanding and contracting, accommodating and assimilating, drawing in energy and expelling energy. Soma is pulsing, flowing, squeezing and relaxing – flowing and alternating with fear and anger, hunger and sensuality.”

Hanna refers to Heidegger’s coinage for human “Dasein,” the creature whose “being is here.” “The human being exists here, located, situated and embodied here where she or he stands. I am not a free spirit: I am an embodied spirit who is always situated in a place, and this place – no matter where I may be – is always here.” Hanna’s extensive claim, in several books, journals, and videos is that the new century will overcome the body amnesia enforced by the last three centuries of building a technological society. Hanna sees an evolutionary shift of focus. Humanity, once fearful of nature and needing to conquer and harness the environment, now stands in a human-controlled environment. The task at hand is to soothe the alienated spirit and re-unify the mind and body which have been torn apart by the analysis and conquest of nature. The larger intellectual context of the Feldenkrais synthesis and the Healing Tao System is spelled out in Hanna’s writings and practices.

If we follow Hanna’s argument and look at history prior to the Renaissance, before the Cartesian split and the industrial revolution, we can see – through Michael Murphy’s large historical tome “The Future of the Body” – that the hagiography of Roman Catholic sanctity provides evidence of human transformative capacities, for what F.M. Alexander called “the resurrection of the body.” Phenomena such as luminosity, stigmata, levitation, and the internal heat of the “incendium amoris” acknowledge the intimacy of active spirit and physical body. Similar phenomena have been attributed to yogic and Zen meditators. Contemporary research on the beneficial effects of meditation implies the intimacy of mind and body.

To conclude with such unanimity about evolutionary somatics would be misleading. Some argue, as does the Australian-based artist Stelarc, that somas always have been and will always remain “zombies,” oblivious of their internal “automation” such as breathing, kinesthesia, and balance. Stelarc asserts that we human zombies have since time immemorial added prosthetic devices to our ensemble of automations. Exhibiting himself as an embodied automaton is the content of Stelarc’s 30 years of performance art.

His “Exoskeleton,” for example, is a jerky and powerful 600 kgm machine into which the artist climbs and walks. The stiff-jointed robotic machine, requiring 18 pneumatic actuators to drive the three-degree-of-freedom legs, pounds and scrapes the ground as it grinds the concrete surface and sends up puffs of dust. The robotic walk is accompanied by amplified compressed air sounds, relay switch clicks, and the impact of the legs hitting the ground. These sounds are augmented by the clicking and rotating actions of a large manipulator hand which extends from the exoskeleton. This fearsome robot human is the inverse vision that belongs to any prolegomena to future bodywork. ■

## DER AUTOR

**Michael Heim**, einer der wichtigsten Medienphilosophen der Internetepoche, lehrt am Art Center College of Design in Pasadena und ist Mitarbeiter bei .copy.