

### Abstract

Across the history of bodily representation, one form continues to pose numerous methodological challenges when exploring the culture of bodily experience: the awareness drawing. When a conscious subject draws their own body, it prompts a number of questions about the understanding of the living body constructed by the individual based on their habitus and the disclosive value of the act of drawing.

This article presents a methodological analysis, grounded in the historical evolution of different visual methodologies for perceiving the living body through the lived body: from anatomical silhouettes to freehand drawing, and from projective methods to expressive practices. The unique features of each method reveal specific limitations and potentials, while also probing the conscious and unconscious dynamics that underpin embodiment.

In freehand drawing method, participants comment on their own drawings, thereby analysing the embodied practices in a more integrated, contextualized language. Based on field research with performers in a circus and patients, the anthropological relationship to the living body appears as a narrative in the first person.

### Keywords

Awareness; phenomenology; body image; embodiment

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## Introduction

Across the history of bodily representation, one form of self-representation continues to pose numerous methodological challenges when exploring the culture of bodily experience. When a conscious subject draws their own body, it prompts a number of questions about the understanding of the living body constructed by the individual based on their habitus and what is revealed through the act of drawing.

The living body refers to the material and biological embodiment of culture, a concept first articulated by Marcel Mauss in 1934 in his work on the techniques of the body. The activity of the living body deploys its material culture primarily (Rosselin-Bareille and Warnier, 2025) beneath the threshold of conscious awareness. A part of this culture, however, can be brought into consciousness, even if perception distorts its material in the lived body, which in this instance refers only to the subjective experience (in the first person) we have of our body.

The material culture of the living body is invisible to the subject since it is embodied directly and progressively in the formation of the habits and techniques of the body. These movements, once they have become unreflective automatisms, operate within us and on our behalf beyond the reach of our awareness to facilitate optimal adaptation. As an expression of the lived environment, social class and gender identity, these automatisms do not deconstruct themselves. A specific method is required to bring them into conscious awareness.

In phenomenology, this first-person body has been framed as a way of describing how the information produced by the material culture of the living body disturbs the perception of the lived body (Klinke and Fernandez 2023). As Donna Haraway (2016) argues, living with this perceptual disruption defines an epistemology of the hybridity between the data of the living body and their perception by the lived body. There is, in fact, a phenomenon of unconscious emergence that allows information from the living body to reach the conscious awareness of the lived body, similar to a process of awakening. Nevertheless, perception still acts as a filter that distorts and delays direct contact with the lived reality (Andrieu 2013).

We will demonstrate that a visual culture of the self can emerge through awareness drawings, uncovering both the habitus and the representations of the living body. First, we review the history of body drawings and how they have been used in health and artistic fields. Next, we provide a more detailed analysis of the methods associated with awareness drawings, highlighting the unique nature of this tool. Finally, we demonstrate how body awareness drawings can be used as a contemporary research methodology to study the body's internal activity among a group of circus performers.

## 1. Historical overview of the visual culture of awareness drawings

Through a historical overview of the development of drawing in the arts and medicine, the aim is to show how drawing is used to reveal both the physical nature of the body and our perception of its internal processes.

### 1.1 From the historical case of anatomical drawing to the first awareness drawing

Depictions of the body's internal structure are a common motif in anatomical illustrations. In these drawings, the dissected subjects strike poses and invite the viewer in a close-up view of their internal organs. A representative example is the Bartoloméo Eustachi's *Otto*

*Tavole Anatomiche* (published in Rome in 1750). In some drawings, the subject may also present themselves self-dissecting and parting their own flesh or is shown observing its own dissection, as we see in *A flayed man holding his own skin* in Valverde de Amusco's *Historia de la composicion del cuerpo humano*, or in the *Dissected female figure* by Pietro Berrettini (published in Rome in 1618). We see the same scopic doubling in the *Tabulae anatomicae* by Pietro da Cortona and Cajetano Petrioli (published in Rome in 1741), where the magnifying glass becomes a hypertext revealing the *infans* changing the flayed woman into a pregnant woman. Eve Keller contextualises this work within "the contemporary configuration of the relationship between the anatomy and the self" (Keller 2007: 65). The portrayal of the bodily self is in this instance no longer anonymous, objective and static; it is presented through the male gaze, personalised, subjective and dynamic. The subject appropriates their own skin, reversing the gaze of the male anatomist in an "autoptic" vision of the woman's body (Sawday 1996: 13). Nevertheless, the male gaze behind this third-person view of women's bodies remains a form of male domination over inner body (Sappol 2024).

In some cases, it is the author's own body that is depicted. Such is the case Albrecht Dürer drawing. While corresponding with his physician in 1520, Albrecht Dürer produced what art historians regard as one of the earliest awareness drawings. Dürer depicts himself bare-chested, gesturing with his hand to an area circled in yellow on his abdomen to indicate to his physician the source of his pain. While the anatomical representation of dissection was widespread at this time, this particular image stands out for its portrayal of self-dissection and self-diagnosis. The difference is that, whereas anatomical culture (Andrieu 2015) depicted dissection to lay bare the internal structures, here it is the subject who paints his own affliction.

The historian George Didi-Huberman (2024) has advanced hypotheses about Dürer's visual and symbolic culture in this drawing. The different shades of yellow, which was also used in other self-portraits, are thought to reflect the artist's physical condition: "In addition to the yellow of glory, there is the more sadly yellowish – *proprie colouribus* – complexion of a skin that is already undergoing the ordeal of its own withering" (Didi-Huberman 2024: 201). It is the pointing gesture more than the yellow hue that is reproduced in the 1515 drawing *Man of Sorrows*. In contrast to the pointing index finger in the self-portrait, the image of the suffering Christ in the series *Christ as Man of Sorrows* gestures away from the wounds. As in his 1493 self-portrait, "the visual clue" (Didi-Huberman 2024: 208) serves Dürer, "in common with his *Man of Sorrows*, as a tool for observing his own body, his emptying as an artist, his hand as a creator... As though he were probing symptomatic surfaces" (Didi-Huberman 2024: 207).

By depicting himself, the artist creates a self-portrait and an imagined view (Vial Kayser 2023) of the body beneath the skin.

## 1.2 Birth and developpement of the chart method

Dürer instead invented a means of self-designation that Schott (2004) understood would later become the prototype of Palmer's 1949 pain chart. The common thread is inviting the subject to self-designate by using their own words to show and talk about their pain. The difference lies in the fact that it was Dürer himself who decided to represent himself in a drawing, whereas Palmer was later only to ask the subject to check off parts of an outline of the human body and name them.

In 1949, Harold Palmer suggested that his patients visualise their experience of pain by drawing it on outlines of the human body: "*The technique is capable of many*

*degrees of elaboration and it is suggested that some value might accrue from the acquisition of a series of charts depicting the visual presentation of organic syndromes. Whereas the majority of organic syndromes are associated with asymmetrical charts, functional nervous disorders exhibit a characteristic symmetry*" (Palmer 1949: 196).

The patient is handed a pencil and "invited to mark in on the charts wherever he experiences pain, particular emphasis being placed on the requirement that he marks on the charts the site of every single pain to which he is liable" (Palmer 1949: 187). Two versions of the outlines of the human body are presented, front and back, with attention paid to the difference between the right and left sides, as the sheet is mirrored by the subject's own body. The following instruction is given: "We have a plenty of time, plenty of paper; plenty of lead in the pencil, now, just take your time and try and do what I have asked you to" (Palmer 1949: 187).

In this way, Palmer collected a considerable number of outline diagrams completed by his patients. He set out a methodology on these cards to visually demonstrate the orthodoxy of functional lesions. The paradox is that the pain remains invisible but not unfelt for the subject. Words alone cannot describe the location, scope and shifts in intensity in the body. Prior to this proposition, diagnostic methods were not able to distinguish psychological pain from organic pain. Palmer thus observed that the mental representation that the subject constructs of the topography of their lived body should be aligned with physio-anatomical codifications. If we take the example of the back, Palmer explains as follows: "The patient's mental concept of 'my back' commences about the fourth dorsal segment and extends down to the ilias crests" (Palmer 1949: 190). The mental extension of the physical area of the back is so physiologically vague that it reveals the perception of the body itself.

Palmer identified distinctions in the various severity pain using five distinct approaches within the clinical interview. First, he put questions to the patient to distinguish between marks that represent similar versus dissimilar types of pain. Secondly, the patient constructs a chronological framework, and is then able to establish relationships between a pain in the head and a different one in their back (Palmer 1949: 187). During the interview, Palmer himself colours in and annotates the features marked by the patient: "I then mark in over the patient's pencilled diagrams, with different coloured inks, the separate varieties of pain as described by the patient, and in corresponding colours I make marginal notes concerning the type of pain and its relationships" (Palmer 1959: 187). In this procedure, Palmer only asked the patient to rank the pain from strongest to weakest in order to prioritise certain pains over others, which gave them a secondary status. Last of all, Palmer interpreted the patient's diagram in conjunction with a physical examination. In some cases, he suggests additional tests (e.g. a scan) prior to giving the patient his final interpretation. Their file would then be comprehensive, "a permanent record of the patient's symptoms" (Palmer 1949: 188).

Even nowadays, the pain chart method is still used in clinical practice and medical research to define typical pain profiles or to measure responses to analgesic treatments (Bernhoff and al. 2016; 2022). In particular, it was updated in the 21st century with a color version that was also annotated by the patient (Masferrer, Prendergast and Hagell 2003). These charts are investigative tools currently being developed in various health and psychology fields. The techniques have subsequently become more diverse, colourful and digitised with the adoption of tablets and connected pens. The most sophisticated have progressed from 2D to 3D scanning (Shaballout, Neubert, Boudreau and Beissner 2019).

In addition, charts continue to be used alongside clinical or research interviews. For example, in a study on sports injuries, researchers used a chart to gather information about elite athletes' personal injury histories prior to an interview (Cocqueret, Eugene, Legendre and Andrieu 2025). New versions are also contributing to a broader exploration of body awareness beyond the pain clinic, such as the Awareness-Body Chart (ABC; Danner and al. 2017).

In other field of application, chart can be used to to invastigate the acceptability of touch in physical education settings. In her study Juliette Vincent uses the body outline drawing to assess how students locate the parts of their body that their classmates and teacher have permission to touch (Vincent and al. 2023). Charts remain a valuable tool in the health sciences and are now being applied to a wide range of topics in social and psychological researches.

### 1.3 Emergence of projective and expressive methods in psychology

During the 20th century, significant developments in psychology occurred, particularly in the study of the unconscious mind and imagination. In response to these developments, two types of graphic method emerged: projective and expressive.

Projection is a technique that uses images to foreground unconscious content. The subject interprets shapes and colours. The inkblot projective technique was invented by Kerner (1857), Binet-Henri (1895), Hens (1917) and Rorschach (1921). The method was initially used as a source of inspiration for the creative imagination and later for projection. The drawing takes shape via the random projection of ink. Justinus Kerner, a German physician and Romantic poet, would turn to a game from his childhood to spark his imagination. He would make inkblots on a sheet of paper, fold it in half, and draw poetic inspiration from the shapes that emerged. In 1857, Kerner produced a collection of 50 inkblots and poems – called *Die Klecksographie*, *Klecks* meaning “blot” or “smudge” – which were published posthumously in 1890.<sup>1</sup>

It is likely that Alfred Binet and Victor Henri were the first to have the idea of using inkblots as a psychological test (Binet and Henri 1895), in 1895, to assess an individual's imaginative capabilities. In 1917, the Polish medical student Szymon Hens presented his doctoral thesis “Testing the Imagination with Formless Inkblots” on schoolchildren, healthy adults, and people with mental health problems. These inkblots are “inner images” (Anzieu 1961: 43) whose realisation emerges in the inkblot. It follows that the blot is not a drawing: it is the subject who reveals or “draws themselves” in the blot by recognising shapes from their imagination.

Hermann Rorschach (Teles Filo 2020) began his work on inkblots in 1911, presenting his medical thesis *Reflex Hallucinations and Symbolism* at the University of Zurich in 1912. Rorschach adopted and transformed a childhood game, *Klecksographie*, where ink is dropped onto piece of paper, then folded to create figures. He designed his test as “a method for interpreting random shapes”. The material consists of inkblot cards with symmetrical spots on them, half of which are coloured. The subject must say what they see in these shapes. Rorschach, however, refused to allow the test subjects to believe that the projective experience was simply a “test of the imagination” (Rorschach 1947: 3). He took his cue from Bleuler, who argued that perception is rooted in three processes: sensation, memory and association. Accordingly, Rorschach defined

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.axelleviannay.com/single-post/2017/05/29/la-klecksographie-lart-des-taches>

the interpretation of random shapes as “a perception whereby the work of assimilation of the complex of sensations and the engram is so intense that it is perceived internally as a process of assimilation” (Rorschach 1947: 4).

Regardless of how projective inkblots may be, they are drawings born from the chance diffusion of ink along the crease of the paper. The randomness of the fold produces figures whose symbolic meaning will only have been acquired, particularly in the Rorschach test, from the perceptions of the subjects. The limits of this projective method have now been established, particularly with regard to body perception. Individuals tended to comment more frequently on certain parts of the inkblots where there was the greatest difference in colour intensity (Matousek, Skobrtal and Badosek 2025). This visual emphasis draws the eye to certain areas, thereby influencing the imagination.

In the field of the expressive method, the draw-a-person test has been used for many years to evaluate a child's mental development. The test was developed by Florence Goodenough in 1926 and revised by Henri-Marcel Fay in 1936 (Fay 1934), then by Jacqueline Royer in 1963 (Royer 1977). It based on a simple principle: the child is asked to depict a person on a sheet of paper. The clinician then applies a scoring system based on the presence or absence of observable features, which provides an estimate of the individual's developmental level. The test was to undergo several revisions and modifications to not just measuring a child's mental age but also their emotional development. Although the psychometric properties of the drawing are no longer considered sufficiently robust for assessing intelligence, due to too high a risk of false positives and false negatives results, ceiling effect and others bias such as artistic skills and motivation (Troncone and al. 2020). From now on the draw-a-person test is developed into more of a broad personality test than an intelligence test, as it remains relevant to provides valuable insight into how the relationship to the body is conceptualised in a clinical context.

In psychoanalysis, the drawing is linked to the unconscious image of the body, first investigated by Sophie Morgenstern in 1927, and broadly developed by her successor Françoise Dolto (1948). In 1949, Karen Machover recognised a new dimension in the drawing, which Ada Abraham developed further in 1963 on the theme of identification (Abraham 1976), seeing it as an intimate image of the drawer – their needs, bodily conflicts, and more specifically, their bodily identification.

On the one hand, techniques and tools based on outline figures (Rorschach, pain charts, pain drawing scored) invite the subject to indicate what they recognise in the drawings and figures, to check parts of the body and to verbalise what they perceive. The language used in these projections expresses the visual culture of subject by the bodily imagination. On the other hand, drawing techniques (children's drawings, body drawings, awareness drawings and blind drawings) produce a representation of the body accompanied by captions to express the experience of internal sensations. The uniqueness of creating figures shows how the subject represents their own body mentally.

## 2. Revisiting/rethinking drawing as a research method

The use of drawing in social science research has a long history and raises questions about the subjectivity of the researcher. For example, upon his return from the Dakar-Djibouti expedition in 1928–1934, Marcel Griaule (1934) used free drawing in the anthropology of the body as a means of presenting the visual cultures of the Abyssinians. Levi-Strauss himself sketched bodily techniques in his field journal among the Nambikwara between 1935 and 1939 (Desveaux 2025). Sketches, as a visual method, more so than photography, describe the movement of the living body based on the anthropologist's perceptual observation, while avoiding as much as possible the projection of his own culture into the drawing. In the field of psychology, the role of subjectivity in drawing has emerged as a key theme. The difference between projection and expression has been studied in depth, particularly by Didier Anzieu.

### 2.1 Freehand drawing as awareness drawing

In psychology, Didier Anzieu examined this question of projection in drawing (1961). He explained this enduring difference between expression and projection when employing these visual methodologies: "In a projective test, the subject is free to say yes and do as they please with the material presented to them... as in psychoanalysis, what matters is what spontaneously comes to consciousness" (Anzieu 1961: 15). Accordingly, even if the material has minimal structure, the projection of affective and fantasy structures is facilitated by a projective technique shaped by the defined material. On the other hand, notes Anzieu: "Freehand drawing, free storytelling and improvised dramatic play obviously 'express' the personality of the person who engages in them" (Anzieu 1961: 22).

In other words, freehand awareness drawings are to be distinguished from awareness drawings based on outlines since their complete freedom in terms of instructions and material positions them as expressive techniques. Once somebody is invited to name an outline, fill or colour it in, the technique is projective since the response is still shaped by defined, standardised material even if the subject remains free to respond as they wish. With these tools, technical rationalisation and the quantified assessment of pain across different regions of the body imply not only that there is a correct answer but also that there is a certain rigour in the data processing (Anzieu 1961: 22).

The challenge of freehand drawing – as we develop it in awareness drawings without a pre-existing template – lies in expressing the unconscious image of the body that the subject has of themselves. It may also reflect the preconscious body schema that organises motor action – as, for example, balance. It is "the body's point of view on things" (Anzieu 1961: 301). These drawings anticipate a personalisation of the body schema, such as depicting one leg shorter than the other due to an imbalance caused by a limp.

The risk of awareness drawings as an image of the body is idealisation, as Anzieu points out: "Childish drawings, whether of a tree, house or person, bear the insignia [...] of narcissism and its wounds" (Anzieu 1961: 306). The drawing may then mask the weaknesses of the personality behind a conscious idealisation but in parallel bear the marks of traumas, wounds and absences. "This type of drawing can be deciphered like a dream" (Anzieu 1961: 306) where "the symbolic disguises, the condensations, displacements and work of secondary elaboration" (Anzieu 1961: 306) have to be identified and unravelled.

Awareness drawing belongs to what Anzieu calls a “poïétique” in the way that the body is *at work* rather than *in the work*. Drawing is a living, individual reality: it is “living, because it is linked to the body, real and imaginary, and to its drives, its functions, the representations – firstly sensorimotor, secondarily verbal – that certain parts of the psychic apparatus make of it” (Anzieu 1981: 11). So long as the drawing is truly free and expressive, it originates in “a motor activity, a rhythmic exercise, a postural experience, and the ‘tonic dialogue’ of the body itself with other animate and inanimate bodies” (Anzieu 1981: 111).

## 2.2 Typology of awareness drawings

Like pictures, awareness drawings convey the culture of the body: on the one hand, the purging of humours and passions (cathartic drawing); and, on the other, bodily memory (mnemosys drawing) and, finally, the theory that the body forges itself (paradigmatic drawing).

Didi-Huberman distinguishes three types of image: the ghost image, the pathos image and the symptom image (Didi-Huberman 2002: 27). The image is understood here as “a body, an organic meeting of objects... a *corpus* of knowledge, an *organon* of principles. Or even a body of doctrine” (Didi-Huberman 2002: 14). Drawing, like the image, conveys what flows from the body: the purging of humours and passions (cathartic drawing), bodily memory (mnemosys drawing) and the theory that the body forges itself (paradigmatic drawing).

We can now make the following distinctions:

- Cathartic drawing is the release of the contents of conscious awareness. It is a channel for expressing what has been repressed in one’s self-representation in order to show what is truly experienced from within (emotions, burning, inflammation, hinterland).
- Mnemosys drawing in this context is consistent with a drawing in chronogenesis. It lays bare details about the subject’s personal, intimate and emotional life through the body’s memory (wounds, scars, fear, dizziness).
- Paradigmatic drawing presents the theory of the body within the body-brain-mind relationship through models of body image, body schema, posture, emotional matrices and temporal learning patterns.

Are awareness drawings extracted from consciousness or do they suspend it by moving through repression? Here we need to distinguish three levels of expression through awareness drawings, ranging from cerebral unconscious awareness to intentional consciousness:

1. The drawing of **(awareness)** by which conscious awareness is absent from the production of the drawing as though the body and its brain had produced it without the subject’s knowledge. Jean-Philippe Lachaux argues that it is the brain that expresses itself directly through the automatic act of drawing. On the subject of elite athletes, he writes: “As the ball begins to rise in the air, they spontaneously see in their mind the small arc that it is going to describe until it falls back to the ground” (Lachaux 2024: 35). In this way, a spontaneous drawing takes shape within and through the brain.

2. The drawing **(of)** awareness is associated with surprise, in the meaning attributed to it by Natalie Depraz (2016). The conscious awareness of one's own body is not entirely recognised in the drawing: it is as though the drawing has overridden the consciousness, as though the former knew more than the latter about the actions of the living body. Consequently, the act of drawing may deepen the field of awareness of the subject's bodily culture.
3. The **(drawing)** of awareness is intentional and voluntary. It faithfully traces the contours of the idea, and proves to be consistent with the mental image that the subject has of their gestures, postures and movements. Here it presents the most accurate representation possible.

### 2.3. Freehand awareness drawings as an anthropology of the internal visualisation

In the framework of freehand awareness drawings, the instructions and interventions of a third party in the drawing process are typically more infrequent. Existing charts restrict how people express themselves by setting a particular standard for the human body, as determined by the doctor's diagnosis. In contrast, free drawing based on the perception of internal sensations gives rise to more subjective configurations. The subject can present their body as they imagine it to be. Free drawing thus provides a means of revealing an invisible materiality experienced from within in a non-discursive manner, which nevertheless warrants further exploration through an interview. This is because anatomical semantisation reveals how the subject constructs a theory of how their body functions (Andrieu and al. 2022).

In this configuration, the subject draws their own body without an outline diagram or pre-defined template. Only one thematic instruction is issued. For example: "Draw however you want, using colours and your inner sensations (pains, injuries, marks, and so forth)." In other words, the subject can use colours to indicate the variations and chronogenesis of their sensations. They then interpret their drawing themselves by presenting it and adding a caption.

The freehand drawing of the human figure may have therapeutic effects since it enables a different description of the experience. *Les Dessins de Patrick* (Le Bohec and Le Guillou 1980: 151) – a pedagogical study that follows the analysis of a child's drawings – shows how imaginary productions have their source in the lived body. For children, the expressive value has even more importance since it helps them not only materialise the imaginary but also express traumatic experiences or what they cannot put into words. In a more recent study, researchers used drawing as a means of accessing the representations of children aged 5 to 11 suffering from sleep disorders (Filhol and al. 2020). The process of drawing made it possible to highlight the emotional and imaginary dimension (hopes and fears) tied to the experience of the illness. The artistic medium uncovers the imagination that is sometimes difficult to bring into consciousness and verbalise for young subjects.

In the field of health, drawing is employed to describe the visual culture of internal organs. For example, patients suffering from heart or kidney conditions may be encouraged to represent the functioning of their organs in a diagram to describe the mechanisms and effects of their illness (Broadbent and al. 2019). In 1980, Philippe-Jean Parquet and Georges Delcambre also asked pregnant women to draw what they imagined their child's body would look like during pregnancy. This allowed them to gain insight into the future mother's conception of her child. The drawings reveal that the

placenta is rarely depicted, but the umbilical cord connecting the child and mother in the womb is always imagined. The uterus, however, is never depicted.

Drawing the inside of the body can also be leveraged to reveal contrasts in lived experience. For example, cancer patients taking part in a study were invited to draw themselves prior to and post chemotherapy, a process that uncovered a shift in the pain of their lived internal activity (Bouak and Bouteyre 2010).

In terms of theme and methodology, it is also possible to draw on the auto-phenomenography developed by Maree Grupetta (2024), which builds on the auto-ethnography of Ellis and Bochner, and of Jacqueline Allen-Collinson (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2001). It contributes to a movement that charts the ethnography of the interior and intimate body in physical exercise (Giardina and Donnelly 2018). In our research, we likewise embrace the value of self-exploration, according the subjects' beliefs and representations credibility, which, though subjective, is not illusory.

Today, the study of the awareness of embodied gestures (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2009) in bodily practices focuses more on excorporation through drawings rather than incorporation.

The methodological hybridity between the visual and the verbal creates new perspectives for researchers since the design of this study is more flexible and evolving. This opens the door to research into embodied sensory anthropology. Cross-disciplinary collaborations between the arts and body-centred approaches may provide a new frame of reference for studying physical culture.

In phenomenology, some researchers are adopting the drawing method to capture the lived experience in physical activities. In a yoga experiment (Stewart and al. 2020), researchers elected to explore a methodology focusing on the graphic production of participants. The phenomenological approach is particularly well-suited to the conceptual framework of the mind-body-world relationship that informs the practice of yoga and the act of drawing as an embodied gesture. The researchers put forward visual interpretations of the drawings created by participants post-yoga, together with composition strategies and related verbal explanations. The analysis of the drawing acts as a bridge between first-person phenomenology and the art of drawing. The methodological hybridity between the visual and the verbal creates new perspectives for researchers since the design of this study is more flexible and evolving. This opens the door to research into embodied sensory anthropology. Cross-disciplinary collaborations between the arts and body-centred approaches may provide a new frame of reference for studying physical culture.

Another contemporary research in phenomenology explores the use of drawing to enhance methodology of embodiment in a pedagogical context (Emond and Venant, 2025). In that action-research study, researchers combine drawing with body awareness exercises as part of a training program for teachers. Their objective is to examine the role of the body in higher education teachers. In their method, drawing complements a phenomenological approach from a learning perspective, with drawings introduced at three stages of the program.

Therefore, contemporary researchers are exploring the use of drawing to understand embodiment, both in the context of sports and in professional settings.

### **3. Freehand drawing in contemporary research: example of circus**

In social sciences, drawing has long been relegated to the researcher's private sphere (field notebooks and diaries) rather than being recognized as a formal methodology.

However, contemporary anthropologists are encouraging researchers to move beyond the realist paradigm and recognise the value of drawing in providing emotional context to traditional methods (Geismar, 2025). This study is part of an ongoing effort to treat drawing as both a subject in its own right and an integral part of the experience. Between 2013 and 2022, Bernard Andrieu (2023) interviewed circus performers about their bodies. They demonstrated their expertise by describing their bodily knowledge based on internal sensations, such as exertion, fatigue, injury, and emotions.

### **3.1. Draw as awareness process**

The main advantage of freehand drawing is that it does not restrict how the subject is represented. This approach mirrors practices in the social sciences, where drawing is employed in narrative studies. In these studies, drawing is used for one of its methodological characteristics: it does not impose a hierarchical order on ideas, but instead conveys experience in visual and spatial terms (Barberis and Grüning 2021). In graphic narration, the strength of drawing lies in its ability to depict an experience in a spatialized way. This is particularly relevant in our case, as the physical experience of circus performers is inherently spatialized.

In addition, freehand drawing is similar to the “unrestrained” method used by anthropologists, as opposed to the sequential method commonly used in comic books (Theodossopoulos and Bonanno 2025). Yet despite the open-ended nature of the task, some participants spontaneously opt for a sequential format to explore how their bodies function.

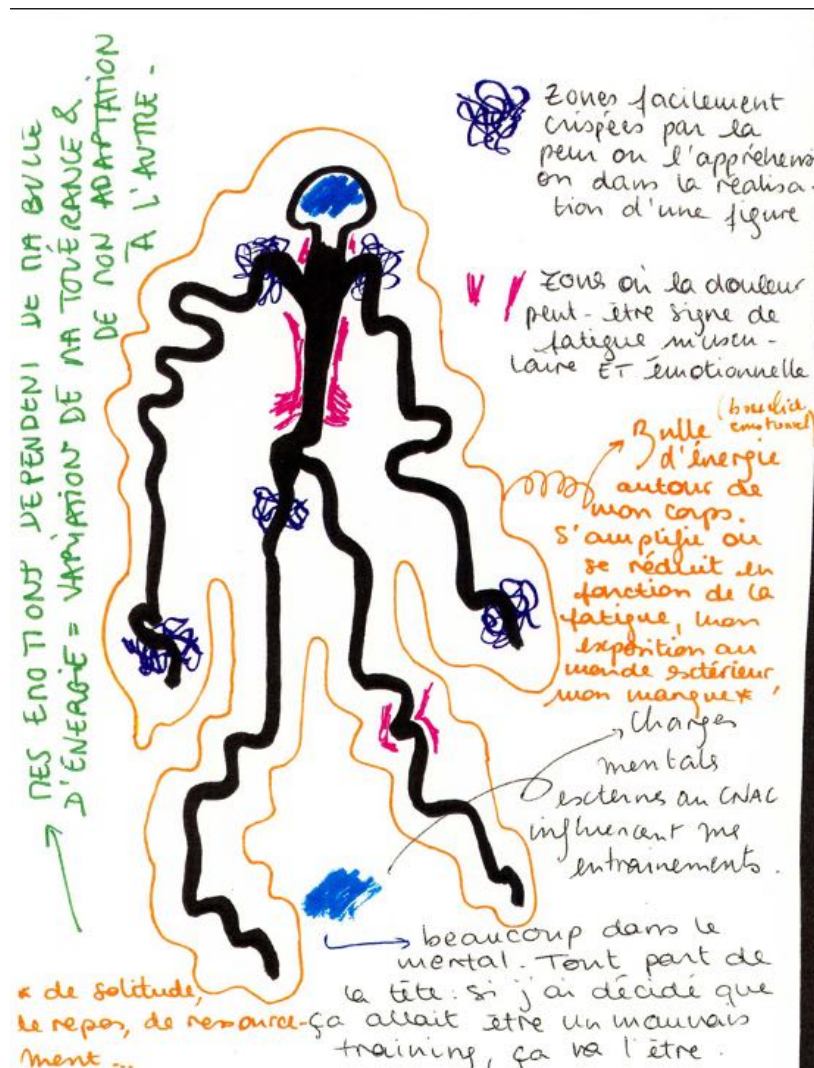
In this study, the drawing process unfolds in three stages:

1. A theme is presented (e.g., pain, fatigue, areas of comfort or discomfort, emotions)
2. The subject freely draws their body without a silhouette template and may or may not use colors
3. They add legends and comments to their drawings to describe their perceptions in their own words.

Drawing and the thoughts that arise during the process are used as an introspective method to awaken internal sensations. In order to produce the drawing, the subject must become attuned to their internal sensations and revisit a memory. This constitutes the first step in a process that culminates in a interview orientred on the drawing. The drawing is therefore not a data, but viewed as an experimental process.

Other contemporary researchers have also utilised the creative process as a means of introspection and as a catalyst for bodily memory. In D’Onofrio and Cogni’s (2025) ethnographic study of migration trajectories, graphic design (animation without a storyboard) is used for this purpose. This approach is particularly useful for addressing intimate and unspeakable subjects and for revealing bodily states and the invisible. Like us, these researchers use participants’ image production as a method to expand upon traditional methods, such as interviews.

For example, in the study about the circus, some drawings reveal inner representations that are usually invisible. In her drawing titled “energy bubble,” Anouk illustrates the link between her emotional experience and her physical fatigue (fig. 1). She depicts in orange what she calls her energy bubble, which expands or contracts depending on her fatigue statut. In this way, the drawing helps to visualize an internal experience that is both invisible and dynamic.



**Figure 1** "energy bubble," Anouk, 2022

Although the drawing is presented without constraints in the first step, some participants spontaneously choose a sequential pattern. This approach is recommended for representing a temporal aspect (Theodossopoulos and Bonanno, 2025). Pablo made this choice when mapping the shift in his attention to different parts of his body during a performance (fig. 2). He depicts the body's positions, as well as the areas of focus at each stage of the performance in green.

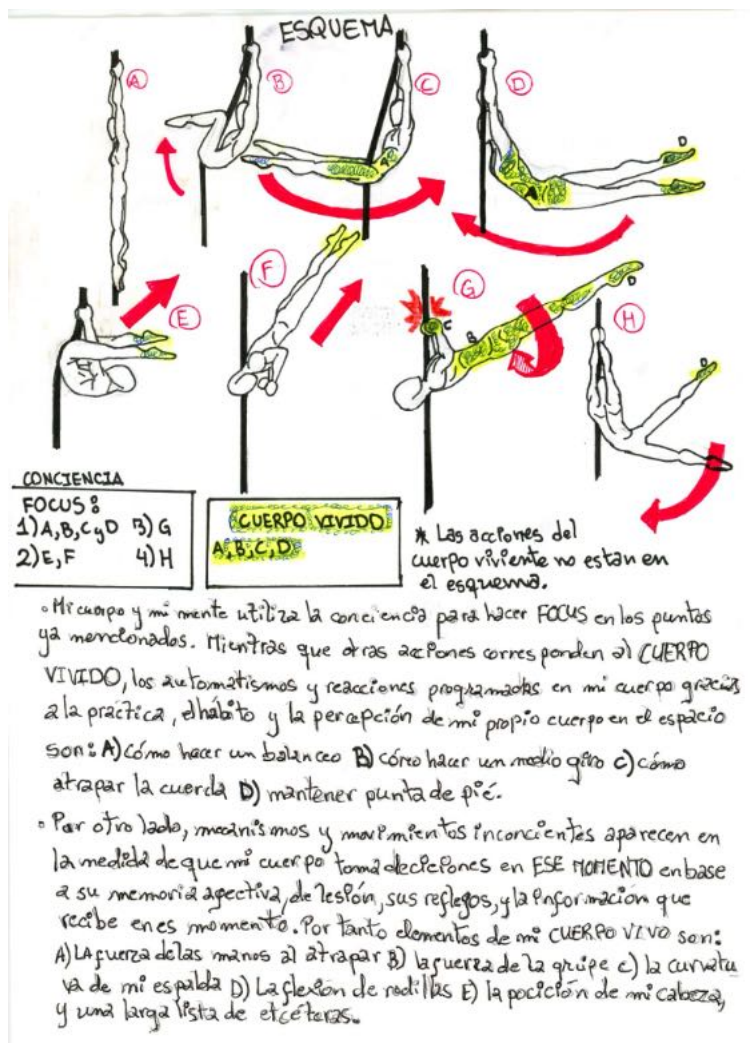


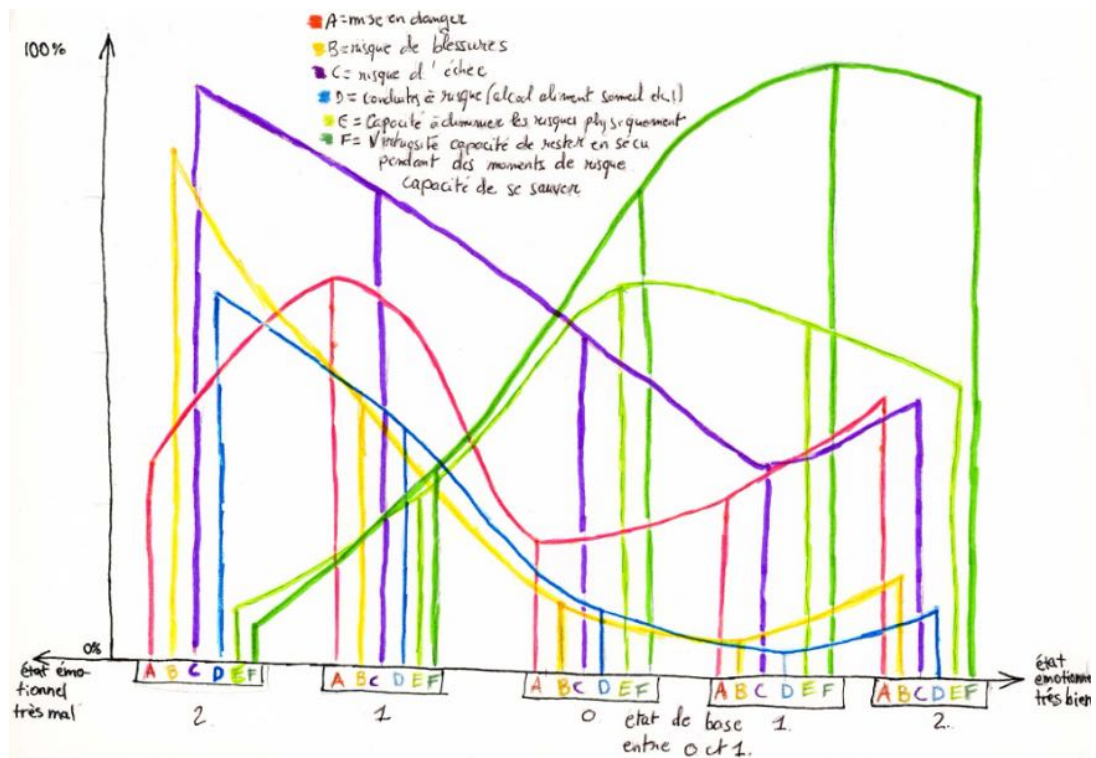
Figure 2 Pablo, "smooth rope"

### 3.2. Coproduction between drawing and language

In their article on the use of comics and graphic novels in social science research, Barberis and Grüning (2021) emphasise the importance of not relegating the drawing to a secondary role in favour of the accompanying text. In our method, the text supports the graphic representation without replacing it. During the final stage of the drawing process, the participant adds a caption to their work. For instance, they indicate areas of importance, sensory intensities coursing through their body, and how they label their internal states. They use colour scales, highlighting techniques and framing to emphasise the most significant parts. The drawing thus elicits imagination that is then supplemented by a more literal narrative in the legend.

During the interview that follows the production of the drawing, participants explain their ideas and conceptualisations. The drawing serves here as an explanatory tool in the communication between the circus performer, expert in their body and techniques, and the researcher. In line with recommendations for using drawing as an anthropological method (Theodossopoulos and Bonanno, 2025), we view the two media (drawing and language) as being in a relation of coproduction. The aim is therefore not to isolate the drawing and the verbatim, but to combine them to produce meaning.

The drawing does not replace the interview, but provides a structure for it. For example, when Mat creates his drawing titled 'Chronogenesis' (fig. 3), he illustrates in 2D the variations in his motor behaviours and performance depending on his emotional state, ranging from feeling well on the right to feeling distressed on the left. He depicts different curves for risk-taking, risk of injury or performance failure. Consequently, the drawing and its caption enable a complex state to be modelled as a continuum of experience. In this way, the drawing serves a pedagogical purpose, enabling the dialogue with the researcher.



**Figure 3** Mat "Chronogenesis"

### 3.2. Drawing a theory of the body

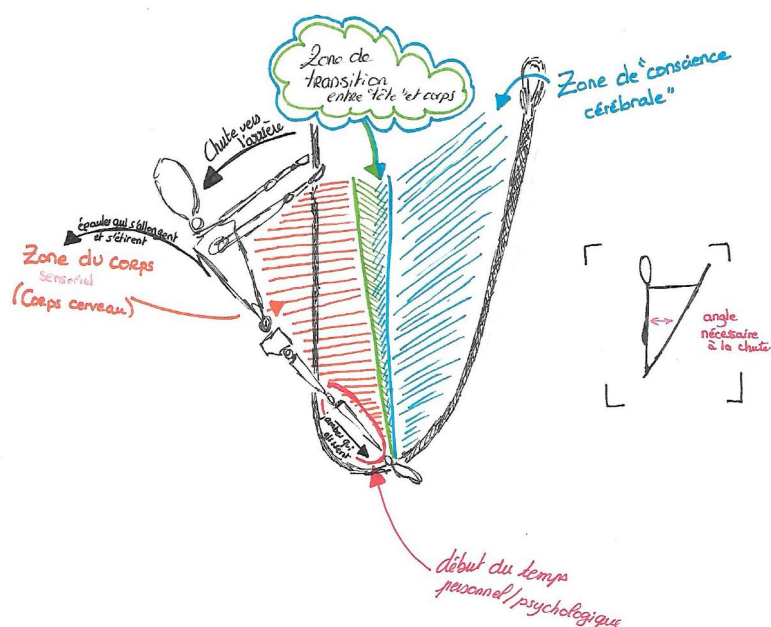
Our research focuses on the phenomenological experience of embodiment in physical practices. This kind of thematic concern has already been raised by Mary Grupetta (2024) with the use of drawing in the auto-phenomenography. This theoretical framework was developed and builds on the auto-ethnography of Ellis and Bochner, and of Jacqueline Allen-Collinson (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2001). It contributes to a movement that charts the ethnography of the interior and intimate body in physical exercise (Giardina and Donnelly 2018). In our research, we likewise embrace the value of self-exploration, according the subjects' beliefs and representations credibility, which, though subjective, is not illusory. However, our method is less restrictive than the chart method because it does not require framework and is more adaptative to the imaginary conceptualization.

What sets the circus performers' drawings in our study apart, is that we focus not just on sensations, but on developing a comprehensive understanding of how the body functions. It is not just about visualizing sensations, but also about articulating the beliefs associated with them. With drawing method, we aim to reveal the theories that circus performers develop about their bodies: the theory of the body (ToB). Unrestrained

drawing is advantageous for supporting theoretical reflection, as it becomes a tool for theorising (Theodossopoulos and Bonanno, 2025). Freehand drawing turned out to be particularly well-suited to our purpose.

TOB derived from the concept of the theory of the mind (ToM) applied to the bodily experience. TOB refers to the mental capacity to infer not just mental states but also bodily states in oneself or others in order to understand them. Although bodily states by definition cannot be objectively observed, they can be made visible through verbatim accounts, drawings and body language. The basic principle behind ToM is to attribute or infer the bodily and emotional states of other people. In ToB theory (Andrieu and al. 2022), the emergence within oneself of qualitative or quantitative data is deduced on the basis of their emotional expressions, demeanour or assumed knowledge of the internal reality of the living body.

Body theory is a form of conceptualization that reveals circus performers' expertise. The drawings sometimes take forms that evoke the sciences; for example, Mat's "Chronogenesis" (Figure 2) features coloured curves that are reminiscent of mathematics or physiology. Others, like Vassiliki (fig. 4), label their sketches in the manner of the life sciences, using arrows, hatching and technical terms in the legend. During the interview, Vassiliki describes her "body-brain" theory, which she uses to explain the attentional and sensorimotor modulations she employs in her jute jarret technique. In her drawing, she depicts an internal phenomenon that lasts only a few milliseconds, yet which is crucial to her performance. In the interview, she defines the 'brain consciousness zone' shown in the drawing. She defines this as a transition zone between the conscious control of movement and more automated gestures, which she refers to as the 'body (sensory) consciousness zone'.



**Figure 4** "jute jarret technique" Vassiliki.

These academic-sounding terms form part of the neo-language individuals create for themselves. The explanations seem academics but remain mostly anatomically and scientifically inaccurate. However, this study reveals that these beliefs even imaginary enable these performers to master complex techniques. Thus, the drawing depicts the

phenomenon as perceived in the body, while the caption reveals the associated linguistic imagination. The theory of the body emerges at the intersection of sensations and interpretation. The drawing therefore enables the structuring of an internal expertise, partially borrowing the structural codes of drawing and scientific diagrams.

## Conclusion

The history of body drawing highlights its distinctive role in visual culture at the interface of art and medicine. The drawing of the flayed figure lays bare the interior of the body, first of the other, as seen through the eyes of the artist-cum-anatomist, and then through one's own eyes, as with Albrecht Dürer's self-portrait. Drawing in its various forms carries both a diagnostic and a phenomenological value since it opens the door onto a lived bodily experience, so intimate and invisible. Even though the use of this tool is still limited in research, it paves the way for methodologies to evolve by introducing an emerging dimension. In this way, drawing opens up opportunities for developing an embodied sensory anthropology at the intersection of the arts and physical culture.

Drawing has a long history in clinical settings and remains relevant today, although it is most often used in the form of charts. Despite the advantages it offers, freehand drawing is still relatively underutilised in the human and social sciences.

However, free drawing is an effective method for studying the body and its inner workings, enabling the creation of a personal and subjective body map. This method encourages an introspective approach to visualise bodily activity. This unconstrained method also offers a way to model learning processes or techniques schematically or sequentially. Awareness drawing goes beyond simply sketching a silhouette, allowing participants to develop and illustrate their own theory about how their bodies function. Awareness drawing is not merely a supplementary element or a visual expression of the imagination, but rather an expansive method of co-creation between the visual and the linguistic.

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