

Ethnologie Française

Call for Papers

(Dis)possessed Gestures

Coordinators

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Introduction

A legal conflict between two cellular telephone manufacturers¹ concerning patents to protect the principle of zooming on a screen by pinching fingers; a lawsuit by a rapper against a popular videogame, *Battle Royale*, accusing them of copying “his” dance step; the promotion of regional products and skills in an “*Indication Géographique Protégée*” [PGI or Protected Geographical Indication]; an early sixteenth-century conflict in Venice between a printer named Aldus Manutius and Master Francesco Griffo, the punchcutter who carved the original Italic font, regarding monopoly over the font [May, 2002]; the development of connected bracelets for workers intended to vibrate in order to prescribe or impose “proper” technical gestures; the appropriation and theatricalization of *savoir-faire* [know-hows] and bodies by the luxury industry. These are just a few examples of situations in which *savoir-faire* and technical gestures have undergone changes in status, conflicts, and redefinitions that ultimately raise legal questions concerning the ownership of practical knowledge.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, managers have viewed intangible *savoir-faire* as a market and integral component of technology transfers [Arora, 1995; Teece, 1981, 1998]. In this financial context, it is clearly in companies’ and industries’ interest to identify and appraise workers’ *savoir-faire-s* in order to be able to count them as “company assets” [Teece, 1998]. For this reason, companies have methodically endeavored to protect “their” *savoir-faire*.² At the same time, prompted by the notion as Intangible Cultural Heritage and other factors, institutions like museums³ have begun to explore how they can include professional gestures and *savoir-faire* in their policies to preserve, promote, and disseminate technical heritage. These initiatives have revived the sense of alarm expressed nearly seventy years ago by Claude Lévi-Strauss [1950] in his celebrated introduction to Marcel Mauss’ book, *Sociology and Anthropology*.

Although the motivations behind these initiatives are varied and in some cases even opposed to each other, they are all intended to promote, capitalize on, and/or protect *savoir-faire* and technical gestures by transferring them from their functions as crucial aspects of daily artistic and professional life to the legal, economic, and patrimonial domains. In so doing, their

¹https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/09/23/les-brevets-victimes-collaterales-de-la-guerre-entre-apple-et-samsung_4768064_3232.html.

²The example of the *Institut des Métiers d'Excellence* LVMH and the future *Maison LVMH/Arts – Talents – Patrimoine* that will move into the former *Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires* are symptomatic of this policy.

³The new program of the British Museum, “Endangered Material Knowledge Program” initiated in June 2019, as well as the European program “Representation and Preservation of Heritage Crafts,” in partnership with the Cnam-*Musée des arts et métiers* are prime indications of these problematic developments.

tangible, material nature (of the body and of the objects involved) as well as their dynamics and the subjects and institutions in question are all profoundly transformed by these transfers and their resulting economic, political, ethical, and social outcomes.

Objectives of this Special Issue

Although raising questions about the ownership of *savoir-faire* and technical gestures is not novel, our purpose in this issue is not to criticize the disappearance of *savoir-faire* or of the technicality of the gestures of workers within Taylorized perspectives on labor, the focus of a specific strand of sociology of work. Nor is it our intention to defend an “emergency ethnology” propelled by a fixed conception of cultures and based more on safeguarding than on analysis [David Berliner, 2018]. On the contrary, this special issue of *Ethnologie Française* does not depart from an *a priori* position, but instead assumes that the prism of ownership will help redefine and restore *savoir-faire* and technical gestures, which have proven extremely resistant to earlier definitional efforts. To take a single example, a technical gesture is a facet of the organization of labor that is a key component in the complex, multidimensional relationships between participants, tools, materials, production sites, and systems of representation. As a result, as Michael Baxandall [1985: 13-14] has observed, “we cannot reconstruct the serial action, the thinking and manipulation that ended in [an artefact] with sufficient precision to explain it as an action. We address the finished deposit of an activity we are not in a position to narrate.” What remains, however, of gestures and *savoir-faire* after they have been transformed, at least statutorily, by being designated as either “intellectual” property or “intangible” heritage?

Is there not a risk, in considering *savoir-faire-s* independently of gestures, and of the agents who execute them as well as of the objects that support them, of associating them solely with an intangible dimension and thereby minimizing the importance of complex underlying strategies of invisibilization, dispossession, imposition, even programming, as well as the normalization and control of *savoir-faire*, technical gestures, and even of bodies?

Further, to what extent do such processes contribute to:

- Reifying, “*vitriifier*” [display-windowing] [Hainard, 1984: 189] *savoir-faire* and technical gestures that are thus enduringly defined? In which case, what becomes of the “adaptative” and “innovative” functions of *savoir-faire*, as Denis Chevallier characterizes them [1991]?
- Reinforcing dualisms such as *savoir* vs *faire*, intellectual/manual, body/mind, or decision/execution? The English term for *savoir-faire* — know-how — seems to allow questions about the links between *savoir* [to know, knowing] and *faire* [to do or to make] to escape. *Savoir-faire* [know-hows] are not knowledges about doing; “know-hows” are different from knowledges, and also from doing or making, as well as something other than the combination between the sum of knowings and doings [Julien and Rosselin, 2009]. As a result, workers often describe their activity to researchers by referring to their job description or the prescribed work itself and do not articulate what it is that they specifically know-how-to-do (“*savent-faire*”).
- Legitimizing the appropriation of routine or professional gestures by large luxury conglomerates [Munz, 2016] or cultural industries?

•Causing the negotiating power and the loci of compromise of *savoir-faire* between workers and employers or the State to disappear [Paradeise, 1987: 45]?

And in view of this series of questions, to what extent does consideration of the question of ownership of *savoir-faire* and technical gestures in turn compel us to interrogate the ability to find new ways of doing things on the margins of institutions, and by so doing contribute to the emergence of new spaces and new actors?

Themes

We believe that the collective reflection on these questions in this issue will be enriched by multidisciplinary contributions based on specific cases that pursue one or several of the following research directions:

1. Descriptions and Analyses of Processes of Appropriation, from the preservation to the protection of *savoir-faire-s* and technical gestures. Designations as intellectual property via patents or intangible cultural heritage represent institutional examples. Contributions to the issue might nevertheless extend beyond such instances to question the ways in which the objects studied allow reflection on transfers of *savoir-faire-s* or technical gestures in situations in which the stakes include similar properties, with a particular focus on the actors involved.

What do intellectual property laws mean by “know-how”? What is it that museums preserve? Which technical gestures are likely to be designated as know-how that merits protection or preservation? In the case of museums seeking to link exhibited objects with their associated technical gestures, how should an implement, machine, or object be displayed in terms of the gestures from which it is indissociable? How should such gestures be represented? And how should the relevant gestures to a given implement be defined and delimited — only the gestures of those who operate an instrument or tool? Those who maintain it? Or should the gestures of those who correct, repair, and adjust it be included? Or those who manufacture the tool? And finally, how can the parasitic gestures that are effects of work but perhaps not directly related to the tool itself (gestures of rest, of annoyance, passion, power, or demonstration, etc.) be accounted for?

Which actors and institutions participate in the process of patrimonialization and appropriation? Who determines the criteria for possession? Who distinguishes between the know-how and technical gestures that merit patents or preservation from those that do not? According to what criteria are these decisions made? To what extent does uncovering the processes and actors of legitimation reveal power relations underlying legal and economic dimensions [Carenzo, 2018]?

Who owns a *savoir-faire*? And furthermore, who is recognized as “*sachant-faire*” [having know-how, knowing how]? Are craftsmen or companies the only actors who “*savent-faire*” (know how to do it) or “*y faire*” (know how to do to it), as the salt merchants’ observed by Geneviève Delbos and Paul Jorion (1984/1990) phrased it? Do industry workers, office staff, teachers, researchers not also possess know-hows?

In the efficient gestures associated with cobots using exoskeletons or prostheses, who — or what — is it that “*sait-faire*” [has know-how, knows how to make/do]? Among supposedly “autonomous” objects or acts of robotic surgery, who owns the *savoir-faire*, and who is responsible in the event of incidents or accidents?

And finally, questions also arise concerning the true reach of ownership of *savoir-faire-s*. What is the scale of ownership? What is the proper unit to use to measure a know-how? Should we measure micro-technical gestures or routine gestures? And what of measuring the subjective sensoriality observed by numerous studies in social anthropology, history, and sociology or does it extend to collectives? To places? To “natural” environments?

2. As a counterpoint, on the margins of or implicit in officialized or legal processes, we are interested in studies that investigate the definitions used for *savoir-faire-s* and technical gestures and their legitimacy in a given time and place: **counterfeit, copy, prototype, collective patent, or the unspoken of fabrication** (as a silent echo of manufacturing secrets described for legal purposes) can also reveal, in the photographic sense, the economic, legal, patrimonial, political, and social stakes underlying the ownership of *savoir-faire*.

In an environment ruled by the rhetoric of digitization and virtualization, accompanied the promotion of a networked, decentralized and delocalizeable industry 4.0 within a globalized economy, what becomes of sovereignty, and how do the geopolitical boundaries of *savoir-faire-s* become reconfigured? What is the role of the inevitable imitations and counterfeits [Bessy, Demil, and Pasche, 2015]? Of copies? Recycling? Or prototypes, which exist in a legal gray or black area and can be considered as sites of resistance or the emergence of new practices, as revealed by attempts to file collective patents or rebuild *savoir-faire-s*? Prototypes are a particularly compelling case that involves two meanings — a “draft prototype” before it attains perfection, and a “model prototype,” a pattern to be reproduced. Both meanings incorporate the idea that *savoir-faire-s* are dynamic because of “their impossible immobility and necessary anchoring in a tradition” [Adell, in press].

Similarly, the unspoken aspects of fabrication (tacit and implicit) compel us to reflect on what escapes and what cannot — or does not want to be — protected or subjected to dispossession.

3. More generally, we anticipate that contributions to this special issue will analyze the consequences of *savoir-faire* and technical gestures for both the activities that they exclude and for new, transferred activities. How does an emphasis on certain *savoir-faire-s*, to the detriment of others (through their legal definitions, centrality in practices, or patrimonial prominence), contribute to the normalization of gestures, even reinforcing prescribed gestures and the transformation of some individuals’ *savoir-faire* into others’ “*devoir-faire*” [must-do]? And, inversely, how do these factors and phenomena contribute to the stigmatization of “*savoir-pas-faire*” [not-knowing-how-to-do]?

What are the consequences of “protection” for *savoir-faire* or technical gestures? By becoming property, how does *savoir-faire* relate to the transmitted “gesture”? Is it codified? Is it transferrable to other contexts? Can informal *savoir-faire*, implicit knowledge, or “*savoir-taire*” [knowing-how-to-keep-quiet] [Zempléni, 1996] be maintained amid procedures that rigidly fix *savoir-faire* or technical gestures (via video or digitization, for example)? How can this “*something*” be reduced to a few gestures and postures? And, once *savoir-faire* or technical gestures are stabilized, what is the impact of this reductionism on **transmission** between peers or via schooling? Or in the case of (public or private) **training** delivered by professionals, to whom does that which is transmitted actually belong? To the institution? To professors? To the student?

We anticipate that article proposals for this issue will be primarily based on empirical sources in technical fields and technologies, as well as from daily life, work, training, education, museums, health, and industry, “here or elsewhere.” We also expect that the authors will address the processual and historical dimensions of their topics. Grounded in specific case study, the proposed articles should clearly demonstrate and document their various arguments. The factors pre-identified by the co-editors range from ethical, legal, patrimonial, social, and politico-economic considerations to questions about the privatization of gestures, the commodification of *savoir-faire-s*/know-hows, and the appropriation and reification of bodies,

as well as the implications of these processes for (un)equal access and the normalization and control of practices, gestures, and bodies.

Calendar

Proposals, in French or English, (including titles, 700 to 1000 words abstracts, and bibliographic references,) must be received by **April 30, 2020**. They should describe the principal lines of inquiry and argument and sources and materials (such as studies and/or archives), and they should be accompanied by brief biographical and bibliographic sketches of the author.

Proposals should be sent to the proposal coordinators, Arnaud Dubois (arnaud64.dubois@gmail.com) and Céline Rosselin-Bareille (celine.rosselin@univ-orleans.fr), who will contact the authors of accepted proposals during **June 2020**.

Final versions (Approx. 7,000 -10,000 words including notes and bibliography) must be received by **December 15, 2020**. Publication of this issue of *Ethnologie Française* is scheduled for **January 2022**.

They should be formatted according to the guidelines in the note to authors on the journal website: <http://www.ethnologie-francaise.fr/en/proposing-an-article/>

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