

Social Synapses: Situated Knowledge and the Deconstruction of Privilege between Law, Drawing, and Practice-Based Inquiry

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Neural metaphor and processes of knowledge

The aim of this essay is to map a number of study and research trajectories through which 'social synapses' may be activated as practices of resistance, with the aim of interrogating the conditions of possibility of a form of knowledge –specifically that related to the field of Drawing– that is capable not of reproducing discrimination and privilege, but of deconstructing them from within. The analysis is based on a complementary external perspective –that of Law– and takes a transdisciplinary approach, integrating theories and practices of drawing, critical legal theories and practice-based studies applied to gender issues. In neuroscientific biology, the synapse represents the point of contact and transmission between neurons,

the site where the electrical impulse is transformed into a chemical signal and vice versa, enabling the circulation of information within the nervous system. Transferred to the social and cultural sphere, this metaphor makes it possible to conceive knowledge production as a set of dynamic, non-linear connections that are always situated within specific contexts [Latour 2005]. Proposing the social synapse as an analytical category therefore means emphasizing that knowledge is also –and above all– a relational practice: not a neutral and universal datum that signifies the same thing for everyone, but the outcome of practices that articulate bodies, technical diapositives, languages, institutions, and power relations. This premise gives

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rise to a number of methodological considerations that inform the present reflection. Firstly, knowledge is always situated and embodied; no standpoint can guarantee absolute objectivity. Questions, responses, implications and responsibilities are all generated by specific proxemic and communicative relations, and every process of knowledge emerges from these. Secondly, these relations concern disciplinary forms of knowledge, but above all, they concern 'border crossings'. To function as emancipatory devices, social synapses need methodologies that can cross disciplinary boundaries. These include the boundaries between drawing, law and gender performance studies, as well as the divide between theory and practice. All of these are part of a whole ecosystem of embodied knowledges. From a transdisciplinary perspective, Drawing is significant because it can be understood as a critical –or 'political' (in the sense that it participates in public life)– dispositive. This means it can contribute either to the maintenance or the destabilization of consolidated hierarchies of power. The way in which a body, a space, or an identity is represented is never neutral: it entails a responsible design choice concerning what is rendered visible or concealed, normalized or marginalized [Rancière 2004].

Languages and the deconstruction of structural privileges

Social synapses manifest themselves powerfully within the dimension of language.

The author of this essay is a legal scholar, and the present observation is therefore situated: it originates in legal language, traverses the language of drawing –on which the author has engaged in dialogue for over a decade with scholars of drawing (among them Massimiliano Ciammaichella), design, and gender performance studies at the Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia– and reflects on gender issues from an anti-discriminatory and rights-based perspective. These themes have subsequently been extended to the languages of generative Artificial Intelligence, namely so-called Large Language Models, which model the statistical distribution of human language rather than its understanding.

Languages, as is well known, may function both as vehicles of emancipation and as instruments of symbolic violence. Visual and verbal language can operate

socially to normalize dissident subjectivities through processes that are often invisible even to the agents themselves. Symbolic violence does not consist in the exercise of direct force, but in the incorporation of classificatory categories and schemes that render only certain forms of existence intelligible, while making others appear impossible or absurd [Bourdieu 1991; 1998]. Bringing into focus phenomena such as systemic gender violence, the invisibilization of trans and intersex persons, the recognition of women's condition as subordinate, and the naming of gender stereotypes and roles necessarily passes through a critique of the universal subject and of the language that defines it. The universal subject of modernity –male, white, European, rational, and economically privileged– is not a neutral fact, but a construct of power that has systematically excluded other subjectivities, rendering them subordinate [Foucault 1978; Young 1990; Appadurai 1996; Puar 2007].

Opening a space for discussing the so-called "mandate of masculinity" [Segato 2016] –a symbolic and material device that promises access to power, social legitimacy, and a form of normality, provided that the subject adheres to a socially recognized model of virility– means creating the conditions for the recognition of other 'narratable subjects' and adopting a critical perspective according to which the multiple subjectivities that today seek to speak and narrate themselves are the result of historical and political processes, rather than natural destiny. Gender rights and policies adopted within legal systems therefore play a central role either in reproducing or dismantling the destiny inscribed in the biological sphere as a foundational requirement of personal identity, and in constructing/deconstructing the privilege of masculinity grounded in biological sex assigned at birth.

Within the Italian legal system, alongside the so-called rights to name and image, sexual identity guarantees the protection of the individual in both personal and social projection. The law equates sexual identity with biological sex, namely the anatomical, genetic, and physiological characteristics with which one is born, and coagulates the very notion of family around this 'natural order', while recognizing as exceptions both the procedure for the "rectification of sex assignment" (Law no. 164/1982) and civil unions between persons of the same sex (Law no. 76/2016). These normative

measures operate as devices of privilege: they establish criteria of recognition, access, and legitimacy that favor certain subjectivities at the expense of others. This is neither accidental nor marginal: the modern legal order has grounded its authority on the claim to express universal principles through the recognition of the 'natural' distinction between man and woman, founded upon the ascertainment of biological sex at birth. In other words, legal rules do not describe an objective pre-judicial reality but rather legitimize a social order through a binary choice.

From a diachronic perspective, it is possible to observe how this overlap between biological sex and gender has produced systemic advantages for some subjects while creating conditions of dependency or coercion for others. Those who benefit from binary categorization will have no interest in deconstructing, criticizing, or abandoning it, since rights, privileges, and social position are constructed precisely upon the category that should instead be called into question.

It may nevertheless be argued that the transformative capacity of law resides in the redefinition of its disciplinary boundaries through dialogue with other forms of knowledge. Such a capacity also manifests itself through a practice-based reconceptualization of legal knowledge, according to which interpretative practice itself produces new legal knowledge. This perspective makes a paradigm shift possible. The law is no longer viewed as a closed system based on the categorization of specific cases under broader, more abstract principles. Instead, it can be seen as an open framework for recognizing relationships and lived experiences. Within this framework, legal interpretation plays a generative role rather than a merely applicative one. Consequently, judges can recognize dissident subjectivities and non-binary identities. They may also recognize new forms of parenthood and polyfamilial relationships. This is in fact occurring through the valorization of a dual dimension, namely the relational and the intentional.

Practice-based studies and the recognition of practice as an autonomous epistemic dispositive

Practice-based studies investigate an epistemological paradigm in which practice itself –design practice as

well as legal practice, in the case under discussion– functions as the primary method of inquiry and knowledge production. Unlike traditional approaches, which establish an instrumental relationship between theory and practice, whereby practice merely applies pre-existing knowledge generated within theoretical domains, practice-based studies maintain that knowledge emerges from practice itself through the hybridization of making and critical reflection on making.

This approach is fundamentally characterized by the recognition of practice as an autonomous epistemic device capable of generating a form of knowledge that cannot be reduced to traditional propositional formulation. The knowledge produced is embodied, situated and tacit, and manifests itself through gesture, the materiality of artifacts and the design and operational choices undertaken. Practice-based studies and research are not exclusively textual; they necessarily include material artifacts, which are perhaps easier to identify within graphic representation, drawing and design cultures insofar as 'projective' and/or creative practice is constitutive of knowledge, and non-propositional forms of knowing are recognized as legitimate and relevant. Examples include design projects, prototypes, artistic practices, installations, performances, drawings and illustrations. In the legal domain, however, artifacts produced by legal practice, such as judgments, procedural acts, innovative legal reasoning, contracts and draft legislation, remain closely embedded within textuality. Nonetheless, they activate the space of implicit legal knowledge produced through practice [Morra, Pasa 2015; Pasa, Morra 2018]. Case law and evolutionary judicial interpretation, the argumentative construction of legal defenses, the drafting of legislative acts by parliamentary commissions, and the writing of contracts by legal professionals all generate legal knowledge that did not exist prior to the operational and practical moment. In particular, when a judge interprets a constitutional principle in relation to a specific case, when a lawyer develops a defense that reveals new interpretative possibilities, or when a parliamentary group proposes draft legislation that redefines established legal categories, they are creating knowledge through legal practice rather than simply applying abstract theories. So-called 'living law', or law as it is applied and interpreted in practice rather than formally codified, constitutes knowledge embodied within the

legal practices of epistemic communities. This knowledge cannot be fully expressed in abstract or textual form, but emerges from the interaction between normative texts, judicial interpretations and their application to specific cases. This knowledge is situated within forensic practices, courtrooms, registries and judicial decision-making processes. It is also embodied in the strategies employed by lawyers when presenting arguments. This knowledge cannot be entirely reduced to disembodied theoretical formulas. All of the aforementioned material artifacts constitute an integral part of the generated knowledge. They do not merely illustrate propositions formulated discursively; they convey forms of reflective and critical knowledge that would otherwise remain inaccessible through textual or verbal language alone.

The specificity of practice-based legal knowledge

As anticipated in the previous section, Law may also be situated within the practice-based paradigm, albeit with specific characteristics distinguishing it from disciplines associated with project cultures. A specific tension indeed characterizes practice-based law. Legal practice –unless one imagines radically revolutionary practices– cannot act *contra legem* and completely break with existing norms; rather, it must operate from within the existing legal order, using available interpretative resources to open them toward new possibilities –constitutional principles, general clauses, evolutionary interpretation of norms, and so forth. In other words, legal practitioners have limited autonomy, as they are constrained by formal procedures, hierarchies of legal sources, obligations to justify their actions, and, of course, the rule of law and the principle of legality. Nevertheless, legal practices can be a source of knowledge production inherent in legal action itself rather than merely the technical application of existing norms.

To provide some examples: whenever legal actors – and first and foremost the Constitutional Court, the Republic's guarantor institution whose principal aim is to verify the conformity of laws with the Constitution– draw attention to the “non-binary condition” as requiring legislative intervention and specify that “in the absence of legislative action, unequal treatment or

impairment of the psychophysical well-being of non-binary persons may occur” (Judgment no. 143/2024); whenever the Constitutional Court declares unconstitutional a norm discriminating on the basis of ‘sexual orientation’ –as has occurred regarding parenthood (Judgment no. 221/2019), adoption (Judgment no. 33/2021), pensions and social security rights (Judgment no. 91/2026), or the recognition of children born abroad through assisted reproductive technology (Judgment no. 68/2025); whenever lower courts recognize the right of trans persons to gender affirmation; or whenever they apply principles of due process and equal protection to cases of intersectional discrimination– in all such cases judicial practice produces knowledge that directly affects the protection of individual rights.

In summary, law functions as an ‘institutional synapse’ when it mediates between normative data and social transformations, producing knowledge that connects abstract norms to embodied subjectivities. This mediation is not a mechanical application but the production of legal knowledge capable of recognizing the materiality of experiences of discrimination and the necessity of transforming legal categories in order to accommodate them [Rodotà 2006; 2012]. It is upon this epistemological reconceptualization of the spaces and temporalities of the juridical domain –as an immanent practice of knowledge production in which theory does not stand above practice, but emerges with and through it– that the deconstruction of privilege and the recognition of so-called “discarded subjectivities” [Ciammaichella, Catinella 2025] may be grounded. It is here that the languages of law and drawing may expand the space of inclusion through recognition of the multiplicity of embodied subjectivities.

Drawing within the space of inclusion: embodied identities, bodies, and discarded subjectivities

From an external perspective with respect to the field of Drawing, it may be observed that it can contribute decisively to the contemporary transdisciplinary debate surrounding gender issues, stimulating processes of social inclusion able to accommodate “discarded subjectivities” [Ciammaichella, Farroni 2022]. In a context in which the body is subjected to judgment,

control, and marginalization, drawing emerges not merely as a technical instrument of representation, but as an ethical-political device capable of recognizing and valorizing difference.

Skin color, bodily forms, age, ability, or clothing become within dominant social systems criteria of distinction and inequality, producing hierarchies that assign privilege to certain bodies while relegating others to the peripheries of invisibility. To speak of the body therefore means recognizing the discriminatory power of gazes and systems that define it as other, inferior, or different, while identifying in drawing and graphic representation an instrument of counter-narration capable of restoring dignity and visibility to marginalized subjectivities.

Inclusion necessarily passes through the recognition of the body as a subject of rights, experiences, and sensitivities. Any inclusive policy or reform project cannot dispense with listening to embodied subjectivities—their differences, needs, and experiences—to construct communities that do not erase diversity but transform it into a resource. From this perspective, Drawing is a practice of consciously 'giving form' to information which, recalling the Latin etymology of *informatio*, does not merely document reality but actively participates in constructing new imaginaries [Ciammaichella, Catinella 2025].

This value-oriented approach radically departs from a neutral or purely aesthetic conception of representation, affirming instead the ethical responsibility of Drawing in shaping the conditions of social intelligibility of embodied identities. Gender stereotypes are not representational errors to be corrected through more accurate images, but symbolic structures producing material effects of exclusion and discrimination. Deconstructing them requires a process of 'informing' the image that does not merely replace one stereotype with another, but destabilizes the binary categories upon which gender normativity itself is founded. In this process, Drawing may function as a device of deconstruction, revealing the historical and cultural contingency of gender categories [Pasa 2026] and opening space for subjectivities irreducible to the male/female binary. Therefore, 'to inform' an image means to consciously and responsibly attribute meaning to it. Within the contemporary context, characterized by global flows, migrations, and transformations

of subjectivity, the theme of the clothed body and practices of dress assumes particular significance. Digital nomadism and clothing practices for traveling subjectivities [Ciammaichella 2025] sheds light on the interplay between clothing practices and the evolving identities of traveling individuals. It reveals how the 'clothed body' becomes a space where identity is negotiated, where the ways in which we represent ourselves become intertwined with mobility, transition, and self-transformation. Traveling subjectivities are not merely bearers of garments; they act through clothing as a device of self-narration and of relating to different worlds. The theme of the measure/dismeasure of the clothed body [Ciammaichella 2024] opens up a crucial reflection on the relationships between rule, excess, and disproportion in bodily representation. Fashion, often accused of imposing restrictive normative standards, is here reread as a field of antinomic tension in which measure and excess coexist and contest the space of representation. The clothed body is neither fully regulated nor fully unregulated; it is a battleground where norms that seek to define it clash with subjectivities that resist being reduced to parameters. From this perspective, drawing can serve as a tool for deconstructing stereotypes by demonstrating that disproportion is not an imperfection to be corrected, but rather an existential possibility that should be recognized. The investigation into 'drawn skins' and the indelible decorations of the body [Ciammaichella, Farroni 2022] likewise demonstrates how Drawing operates upon the bodily surface not as superficial application, but as a practice of identity inscription that leaves permanent traces. Tattoos, scarifications, and other bodily practices are interpreted as graphic languages interrogating the boundaries between nature and culture, biological datum and symbolic construction. These practices demonstrate that the body is not a pre-existing datum prior to representation, but is itself the product of practices of Drawing that model, decorate, and render it visible. Recognizing the inclusive value of these practices means accepting that marginalized subjectivities are not deviant with respect to the "norm," but bearers of alternative forms of bodily knowledge that Drawing may valorize. The analysis of identity representations within the design universe of Lee Alexander McQueen [Ciammaichella, Pasa 2025] demonstrates how

drawing in fashion can render visible non-conforming subjectivities while reflecting upon the non-existence of a universal body and of a 'natural' femininity from a trans-species perspective [Muñoz 1999]. Within his creative process –from sketch to runway– the fashion project becomes an instrument capable of giving form to what often remains marginal or unspeakable. McQueen's collections, fashion shows, and sartorial objects are not merely commercial products, but critical devices interrogating representations of the body, vulnerability, violence, and beauty: gender emerges as a cultural and performative construction open to continuous reinterpretation [Butler 1990; 1993]. Particularly emblematic is the collection *Plato's Atlantis* (2010), which imagines a post-biological future characterized by hybridization between human and non-human, natural and artificial [Haraway 1991]. Technical drawing and 3D modeling do not reproduce dominant aesthetic canons but rather explore embodied identities. By employing grotesque imagery, parody and the uncanny, McQueen celebrates the diversity of gender and identity, transforming clothing into a form of self-expression and a platform for critical reflection. Like other contemporary creatives, from Iris van Herpen to *Matières Fécales*, McQueen demonstrates that drawing is not merely a technically refined design practice, but also a fundamental analytical tool for reinterpreting spaces, narratives, and identities [Davis 1992]. It is an epistemic practice that produces knowledge, giving form to worldviews and alternative ways of existing.

Another particularly relevant aspect of the contemporary debate on plural subjectivities is the question of the face and its representation in the age of artificial intelligence [Ciammaichella 2023]. *This Person Does Not Exist* explores the theories and practices surrounding the creation of an idealized face using algorithms. The investigation reveals how digital technology is reshaping the conditions for visual identity. Although AI-generated faces are not real, they are nevertheless perceived as such, producing concrete symbolic and affective effects. In this context, drawing must interrogate which faces are represented and excluded, and which aesthetic and identity norms are reinforced or destabilized through digital representations. Thus, the question 'Who exists?' posed within the transdisciplinary debate on identity and gender becomes a

political question concerning the social recognizability of subjectivities.

In conclusion, the value of practice-based studies lies in their ability to operate on the ethical-political level [Eagleton 1996]. They don't just reflect and document the world, but they actively shape it, making some viewpoints visible while others remain hidden or marginal.

Conclusions

The metaphor of social synapses offers an original interpretative key for understanding how the connections between practice-based studies, legal structures, and languages of representation may transform knowledge production and the construction of forms of knowing. In particular, drawing within fashion emerges as a projective practice capable of challenging the positivist claim that knowledge is disembodied, abstract, and universal, devoid of relational memory and detached from situated contexts. Here, drawing is not merely representation, but a critical device that produces knowledge. The body, in its needs and experiences, thus becomes the privileged site in which drawing may exercise an inclusive function, recognizing that identity is a relation and an ongoing narration rather than a neutral natural datum. Crucial in this regard is the awareness of the responsibility accompanying every projective practice of representation: for example, the conscious use of 3D modeling and generative Artificial Intelligence must be accompanied by reflection on the limitations and distortions these and other digital technologies may convey. Generative AI systems, in particular, incorporate the biases of their developers and training datasets, tend to reduce symbolic complexities to statistical data, and risk flattening differences into "average models". Consequently, a conscious use of such technologies requires responsible valorization of fragments of other forms of knowledge.

Legal practices –and judicial practice in particular– may function as 'institutional synapses' mediating between normative data and social transformations, deconstructing privilege, transforming diversity into a resource, and preventing the marginalization of 'discarded subjectivities' to imagine more inclusive

communities. The integration of practice-based studies and research may foster anti-discriminatory gender perspectives, anti-speciesism and non-ableist approaches. This could nurture an embodied and relational legal knowledge that recognizes the materiality of experiences of discrimination. It requires overcoming the separation between formal law and social reality, since legal norms always operate within specific contexts of power and their interpretation cannot be

abstracted from their material implications. Whether reconstructing in 3D the legacy of a visionary designer such as McQueen, mapping the complexity of bodies and faces through generative AI, or challenging binary categories within courtrooms, the objective remains the same: to open new spaces of inclusion while recognizing that even those who critique privilege are always implicated within networks of power that must be continuously interrogated.

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