

WHAT A BODY CAN DO

Technique as Knowledge,
Practice as Research

Ben Spatz

First published 2015
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Spatz, Ben.

What a body can do : technique as knowledge, practice as research /

by Ben Spatz.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Performing arts Technique. 2. Movement (Acting) I. Title.

PN1590.T43S63 2015

792.028--dc23

2014035938

ISBN: 978-1-138-85409-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-85410-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-72234-4 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon

by Taylor & Francis Books

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	ix
JOSEPH ROACH	
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction: What Can a Body Do?	1
<i>A body can ...</i>	1
<i>Five stories</i>	5
<i>From performance to practice</i>	9
<i>Embodiment and sustainability</i>	11
<i>Methodology and chapters</i>	14
1 An epistemology of practice	23
<i>Which epistemology?</i>	23
<i>A selective genealogy of technique</i>	26
<i>The structure of practice</i>	38
<i>Branches and pathways</i>	44
<i>Linguistic peninsulas</i>	48
<i>Sedimented agency</i>	50
<i>The trope of excess</i>	56
<i>Research in embodied technique</i>	60
<i>The problem of the substrate</i>	64
2 The invention of postural yoga	73
<i>Yoga and physical culture</i>	73
<i>A royal success</i>	75
<i>The yoga wars</i>	80
<i>Healthism and “performance”</i>	83
<i>Two studios in the East Village</i>	86
<i>The gendering of yoga</i>	92

CONTENTS

<i>Between athletics and somatics</i>	95
<i>A therapeutic turn</i>	100
<i>What is physical education?</i>	104
3 Actors without a theatre	113
<i>Craft and presence</i>	113
<i>Beyond “actor training”</i>	117
<i>Stanislauski’s threshold</i>	122
<i>The method of physical actions</i>	129
<i>Grotowski’s legacy</i>	132
<i>Songs and other epistemic objects</i>	136
<i>A research culture in acting</i>	147
<i>Interdisciplinarity</i>	153
<i>Laboratories</i>	163
4 Gender as technique	171
<i>How to slice a cheese</i>	171
<i>Research in everyday life</i>	175
<i>The problem of sexual difference</i>	179
<i>Fracturing the feminine</i>	186
<i>Masculinities</i>	191
<i>Identity and inertia</i>	197
<i>Current research in gender</i>	203
<i>New paradigms</i>	209
5 Embodied research in the university	217
<i>Blue skies?</i>	217
<i>The epistemic impulse</i>	221
<i>“Practice as Research”</i>	225
<i>The archive and epistemic distance</i>	234
<i>Research design and methodology</i>	242
<i>The fourth division</i>	247
<i>Bibliography</i>	253
<i>Index</i>	275

FOREWORD

To Benjamin Spatz, as to others who have worked carefully and thoughtfully in the studio as well as the study, live performance is not an ephemeral art. In *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research*, he points out a fundamental truth: that the highly evolved practices of physical culture (as in sport or martial arts) and performing arts (as in theater or music-voice) “are products of sustained research in embodied technique.” Embodied techniques live on in the communicable practices of master teachers and their students, who transmit them not only across town, like viruses, but across time, like genes. Spatz’s objective is to understand those transmittable (and hence researchable) techniques in the broad spectrum of “social epistemologies.” He does so with full awareness of how powerfully embodied techniques in the arts may reflect and influence the practices of everyday life in gender roles and other roles. Appositely, he begins his book with Spinoza’s very practical philosophical question: “What can a body do?” Through five chapters, he suggests many answers, of which my personal favorite remains, “A body can mind.”

Ben Spatz isn’t working unopposed. As the most chicken-brained idea of Western metaphysics, “the separation of mind and body” still rules the roost. Mind–body dualism underlies the distinction between mental and manual labor, for instance, which grounds the current world order of economic injustice in gross income inequality. Less egregiously but still exasperatingly, mind–body dualism also still constrains meaningful conversations across the hall between studio and study, even in institutions that should have left it behind long ago. Acting students are still told—I have heard it recently from teachers who ought to know better and almost certainly do—that actors need first of all “to get out of their heads,” as if decapitation is a viable option as prerequisite to a course of study. Dance teachers are still told—I have heard it recently from administrators who don’t know any better and probably never will—that

FOREWORD

students can't possibly be learning anything academically rigorous if they're on their feet and moving.

To cut through this philosophical and pragmatic Gordian knot, a new pedagogy needs a sharper knife. To sever ties to a false instrumentalist valuation of the arts, teachers and students alike deserve more muscular theory and more thoughtful practice. *What a Body Can Do* whets one version of this useful blade. Generationally inflected by the work of Jerzy Grotowski and his legatees, Spatz well knows that "technique" is not merely technical. Healthily skeptical of the British Practice as Research (PaR) movement, he also well knows that practice without documentable outcomes cannot be valued as research. Disposed to storytelling as well as principled abstraction (like all good acting teachers), he well knows that generality and specificity are partners. As a sometimes close reader of the historical literature on the actor's art, he also knows that acting has always had the potential to be understood as a science. If this has a familiar ring, that is because to write a proper Foreword one needs to look backwards. Thirty-five years ago, having earned tenure as an acting teacher and director before giving my first paper at an academic conference, I was thinking similar but (mostly) unwritten thoughts. Ben Spatz's book now embodies some of the most important of them and others besides, and perhaps now their time has come.

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[A] mode is said to have affections by virtue of a certain capacity of being affected. **A horse, a fish, a man, or even two men compared one with the other, do not have the same capacity to be affected: they are not affected by the same things, or not affected by the same things in the same way.** A mode ceases to exist when it can no longer maintain between its parts the relation that characterizes it; and it ceases to exist when “it is rendered completely incapable of being affected in many ways.” In short, relations are inseparable from the capacity to be affected. So that Spinoza can consider two fundamental questions as equivalent: *What is the structure (fabrica) of a body?* And: *What can a body do?* A body’s structure is the composition of its relation. What a body can do corresponds to the nature and limits of its capacity to be affected.

(Deleuze 1990: 217–18)

Everything that can be said about spiritual things can be translated into the language of master techniques.

(Grotowski 1990)¹

INTRODUCTION

What Can a Body Do?

A body can ...

“What can a body do?”

Gilles Deleuze borrows this question from seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Yet equating the structure of a body with its capacities aptly crystallizes a series of much more recent movements in philosophy: from rational thought to unconscious intersubjectivity, from systemic coherence to irreducible difference, and from the abstraction of mind to the materiality of bodies. How then is this question to be answered? With what kinds of bodies, and what kinds of doings, should we be concerned? In this book, I take the Deleuzo-Spinozan question as the starting point for a theory of embodied knowledge, or what I call an *epistemology of practice*. In developing this theory, I wrestle with divergent ideas about knowledge, practice, and embodiment, examining them in relation to each other and applying them to a series of historical and contemporary case studies. My examples are drawn from three major areas: physical culture, performing arts, and everyday life. Together these are part of a larger domain, *embodied practice*. I argue that embodied practice is structured by knowledge in the form of technique, which is made up of countless specific answers to the question: *What can a body do?* The technique of dance, acting, martial arts, yoga, and even everyday life will here be understood as a contiguous field of substantive answers to this question. The central argument of this book can be summarized as follows: *Technique is knowledge that structures practice*.

By surveying technique across the domains of physical culture, performing arts, and everyday life—linking theatre, dance, and performance studies to other strands of social and cultural thought—I attempt to develop an epistemologically rigorous concept of technique as

knowledge. This concept, I argue, allows us to conceive of the field of embodied practice as fundamentally epistemic—structured by knowledge—which in turn leads to new and provocative ideas about the relationship between specialized and everyday practices. What are the real possibilities of bodies, alone and together, in motion and in stillness, immediately and in the long term? What are the limits of embodiment in practice? If embodied knowledge is both substantive and diverse, then what kind of research produces it, and how does it move from one body or cultural context to another? On what common grounds can physical disciplines like martial arts or postural yoga, performing arts like dance and theatre, and embodied identities such as those of gender, race, and class be said to intersect? From what epistemological perspective could such practices be viewed as contiguous and hence mutually transformative in ways that go beyond mediation, representation, and conscious thought? To answer these questions, I draw on theories of embodiment and epistemology from theatre, dance, and performance studies, as well as from cultural studies, religious studies, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. Although theatre and performance studies is my home discipline, I understand this project as part of a growing, interdisciplinary interest in embodied practice—part of what has been called the “practice turn” in theory and philosophy (Schatzki *et al.* 2001).

Philosophical answers to the Deleuzo-Spinozan question come from many sources. However, the question of what bodies can do is not one that can be answered through discursive means alone. Rather, as Deleuze asserts, we must “concretely try to become active” (1990: 226). To concretize my desire for a more substantive vision of embodied practice—as distinct but related to theatre and performance—in the past year I organized two small events under the title “What a Body Can Do.” Both events took place under the auspices of theatre and performance: one at the 19th Performance Studies International conference held at Stanford University (Mahmoud 2014), and another as a guest workshop for an undergraduate course on New Performance at the College of Staten Island in New York City. Before each event, I issued a call for embodied presentations from the participants. Instead of short performances, I requested “demonstrations” or “enactments” that responded to the question: *What can a body do?* Each contributor had to provide a title, in the form: “A body can _____.” The contributions presented ranged across many axes: from skilled to unskilled, verbal to athletic, technological to naked, abstract to specific, solitary to interactive, and more. The titles, which can scarcely do justice to the enactments they name, included the following:

INTRODUCTION

A body can do the Charleston
A body can undo
A body can bend your perspective
A body can resonate
A body can mind
A body can invite you to listen
A body can respond to questions
A body can manipulate sound
A body can become perfect through imperfection
A body can imagine itself a rock
A body can time travel
A body can pulse
A body can interpret
A body can warm up
A body can stagnate
A body can conform
A body can tell a story
A body can be labeled
A body can think
A body can expand
A body can alliterate
A body can overcome
A body can jump a hundred times
A body can sing an old Jewish folk song

My background includes substantial physical and vocal training as a theatre artist. However, at each “What a Body Can Do” event, I tried to create a space in which people could come together and share embodied practices without any pressure to perform in a virtuosic way. I wanted to create the opposite of a talent show, the opposite of popular television

programs like *American Idol* and *So You Think You Can Dance*. Such shows draw attention to the embodied technique of song and dance, but they do so under the assumption that *we already know what bodies can do*. The question posed by such shows is: *Who can do it best?* The competitive format demands that all performances be ranked as winners and losers, best and worst and runners-up. This approach puts individual ability at the center, rather than transmissible knowledge. In contrast, I want to advocate the fostering and support of “research culture” in diverse areas of physical culture, performing arts, and everyday life. The notion of research, further elaborated below, demands that the question remain open: *We do not yet know what a body can do*. From this perspective, individual ability is less important than the continuous creation and transmission of knowledge. Hence, this book contains numerous examples of what I will call *research in embodied technique*. As I will show, such research is distinct from but analogous to scholarly research, which may analyze or study embodied technique to better understand it. The kind of research on which I focus here aims to generate not new facts or information, but rather *new technique*.

Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth have recently noted that Spinoza’s fundamental assertion—“No one has yet determined what the body can do”—is “still very much with us more than 330 years after Spinoza composed his *Ethics*” (2010: 3). Indeed, they affirm, “No one will ever finally exclaim: ‘So, there it is: now, we know all that a body can do! Let’s call it a day.’” Brian Massumi concurs: “The short answer to the question ‘Do you know what a body can do?’ is simply: ‘No!’” (in Böhler *et al.* 2014: 23). Much as I agree with this sentiment, I do not find the question of bodies and doings to be adequately answered—or even adequately posed—by the critical affect theory that Gregg, Seigworth, and Massumi champion. There is a lack of concreteness in the concept of affect that fails to recognize the detailed and effortful labor of those who search in tangible ways for answers to the question: *What can a body do?* On the other hand, the “cognitive turn” in theatre studies—discussed further below—goes too far in the other direction, assuming that science holds the key to understanding what bodies can do. Moreover, I fear that there are many who do think we have answered the question and who are ready to call it a day when it comes to embodied technique. Sociologists recognize “a widespread consensus today that contemporary Western societies are in one sense or another ruled by knowledge and expertise” (Cetina 1999: 5). But this knowledge and expertise is commonly assumed to be about the manufacture and usage of advanced technologies. There can be no doubt as to the urgency of technological questions, but what about knowledge of embodiment?

What about the possibilities afforded to us as bodily beings? It may seem as though, after hundreds of thousands of years of embodied existence, humans have thoroughly explored all the possibilities of embodiment—that we now know all there is to know about what bodies can do. This book argues the contrary, namely that embodied technique remains a vital area of ongoing exploration, in which the potential for valuable new discoveries has in no way been exhausted.

Five stories

In 2006, I came across a newspaper article about Will Lawton, a man who started training in martial arts when he was in his thirties and eventually opened his own training studio in Bronx, NY. According to this article, Lawton had been hanging around several martial arts studios for some time without taking his practice seriously. Then, one day,

a friend took him to the concrete basement—a subterranean room on Morris Avenue where eight men were practicing jujitsu. “I saw these guys throwing each other and said, ‘That’s what I want, right there,’” he recalls. The next day he showed up with a uniform. That was 17 years ago.

(Murphy 2006)

The story is striking because it tells of a room where something of great intensity and meaning is taking place: a practice, an exploration, a way of life. What was so special about this room? Why is it that Lawton had never taken the study of martial arts seriously until he came to that particular place? The image of “guys throwing each other” invokes athleticism, masculinity, and artistry—all topics of concern in the chapters that follow. But what stands out from this story is the sense of recognition and clarity Lawton experiences when he witnesses their practice. “That’s what I want, right there,” he says to himself, and begins a process of physical, mental, and vocational transformation that will extend for decades.

Lawton’s story resonated with me in 2006 because I had recently spent time in a very different kind of “concrete basement.” In 2003, I moved to Poland, where I lived for two years, working with a number of theatre artists influenced by sustained contact with Jerzy Grotowski. For eight months I was an apprentice performer with the Gardzienice theatre company, where I performed in touring versions of *Elektra* and *Metamorfozy* under the direction of Włodzimierz Staniewski. The following year, I had a Fulbright Fellowship at the Grotowski Institute in