

WHAT A BODY CAN DO, LONDON: ROUTLEDGE,
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INHERENT to circus is a driving curiosity of “what a body can do.” Hours of physical training and creative exploration are committed to this inquiry, proffering a wide array of unexpected answers. And yet, perhaps the greater difficulty lies in ensuring that the resulting knowledge is harnessed and transmitted.

What a Body Can Do is an impressive undertaking by Ben Spatz to develop a comprehensive epistemological framework of embodied knowledge to serve research and practice across a wide range of contexts, from physical education to the performing arts to the everyday enactment of our social identities. Spatz’s central thesis is that underlying all embodied practices is *technique*, which he characterizes as “the transmissible and repeatable knowledge of relatively reliable possibilities afforded by human embodiment” (16). Spatz weaves together strands from philosophy, sociology, performing arts, cognitive neuroscience and gender studies to craft his strong theoretical claim and detail its many practical implications. *What a Body Can Do* is therefore not only an ode to the complexity and importance of embodied knowledge, but a call to action to integrate this epistemic field within and beyond academia.

Spatz opens by harkening back to Spinoza’s question (Deleuze), “What can a body do?” setting the scene with anecdotes and providing a program for what will unfold. He builds his theoretical framework in chapter one (“An epistemology of practice”) while paying careful attention to the terms that scaffold

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it. In a pushback against the seemingly haphazard uses they enjoy in everyday discourse, Spatz meticulously defines words such as *technique*, *practice*, *training* and *performance*, emphasizing their stronghold on shaping our understanding of embodied knowledge. He draws a clear distinction between *practice* and *technique*, the former referring to “concrete examples of actions, moments of doing, historical instances of materialized activity” (41) and the latter referring to the “*knowledge content* of specific practices” (41), transcending time and space. Spatz grounds this definition in a genealogical overview of *technique*, tracing a throughline across six different times and viewpoints—from Aristotle’s *techne* as one of five modes with which the “soul grasps at the truth” to Randy Martin’s take on how multiple overlapping techniques compose a dancer’s body.

A central question emerges in this reframing: how does one move from embodied practice to the *discovery* or *invention* of new knowledge? While Spatz regrettably bypasses an analysis of the differences between these ways of arriving at new knowledge, he offers a convincing argument about how both occur through the body. He considers technique a “negotiation with the relative reliability of materiality” (42), where materiality is human embodiment. In other words, the body is the site of research on how to engage with material reality, where following a line of technique “opens up a particular range of new possibilities while foreclosing others” (46). Continuous exploration creates a “network of fractally branching pathways that vein the substance of practice” (44) with new branches shaped by the specific conditions of one body to the next; these branches grow when technique diverges, transforming the body to grant further possibilities.

Spatz’s account of the body as the substrate for knowledge production provides much-needed epistemic continuity to bridge embodied research across all aspects of life, and his account of how bodily variation enables new branches in technique has important political and social implications. In chapters two (“The invention of postural yoga”), three (“Actors without a theatre”) and four (“Gender as technique”), he delves into numerous illustrations of how “we come to know ourselves, others, and the material world through the myriad pathways of technique” (180). From everyday activities to the extremes of human performance, several of the experimentations Spatz discusses parallel contemporary lines of circus research. His overview of embodied practices underlying research in gender (203-209) closely aligns with the work of Agathe and Adrien, who are forging new pathways in hand-to-hand acrobatics to provide counter-stereotypical techniques that challenge enacted gender norms (*N.Ormes*). Spatz’s reflection on Matthew Stanford’s turn to yoga as a research methodology to map and rediscover his newly paraplegic body (101-103) resonates with the “fun and

creative puzzle” Erin Ball (31) describes in working outside of standard circus norms to embrace the unique possibilities of a Disabled body. Importantly, Spatz notes that research in technique “assumes no ideal body, although it must always work through particular bodies in order to discover possibilities that may then travel beyond them” (66). This supports Rombout’s argument that circus rigging, which drastically changes how a body can travel across space, is “not only a technical aspect, but also an essential element in the artistic process” (Rombout 40).

To this point, Spatz’s reconceptualization of *technique* offers an important departure from the reductive, and often negative, reputation it has within the performing arts. Among theorists and practitioners alike, common rhetoric deems that the value in creative practices resides beyond the “merely technical,” with this “residuum” rendering performance inherently ephemeral and irreproducible. In an astute and timely challenge of this pervasive dogma, Spatz terms this romanticization the “trope of excess” (56), critiquing it both as “an artifact of spectatorship” (58) and a disservice to the production and transmission of knowledge in the performing arts. While he concedes that practice does not reduce to technique—rather, it arises from numerous filaments of technique bound to a specific space and time—he emphasizes that “[a]ll life is ephemeral. Not just performance but every moment of practice exceeds our ability to ‘capture’ or articulate it in words, images or digital information” (239).

Herein lies a key distinction Spatz draws between the current state of embodied knowledge and *scholarly* knowledge. He characterizes the latter as “a painstaking construction, maintenance, and interpretation of a rich synchronic [across space] and diachronic [over time] archive” (239), circumventing some of the ephemerality of life. In chapter five (“Embodied research in the university”), he stresses that the poor standing embodied knowledge holds in academia is partly due to our reducing *research* “merely to an interdisciplinary relationship between embodied practice and theoretical knowledge” (233) and our consequent failure to consider *practice* itself as a legitimate research methodology producing documentable knowledge.

To bridge the gap between practice and theory, Spatz incites embodied practitioners to “produce stable, transmissible documents of the technique that structures their practice” (235) rather than focusing on the aspects that elude capture. He invites us to explore the potential of multimedia and network technologies to reveal new territories of knowledge and render them available to academic scrutiny; he has also founded the *Journal of Embodied Research* to provide a home for such research. A similar commitment to capturing and transmitting the knowledge content of embodied practice is evident in the integration of multimedia documentation in *Circus: Arts, Life and Sciences*, as well as the National Circus

School of Montreal's exemplary efforts to create a comprehensive, cross-referenced film archive of juggling techniques and a methodological tool to guide new creations.

While such endeavours may help elevate technique to a branch of knowledge on par with the natural and social sciences, Spatz additionally posits that "the diverse goals that motivate embodied practice are eclipsed by an idealized vision of health as the universal goal" (83). Healthism ideology is evident not only in the sports-centered focus of physical education but also in the appropriation of the arts as a vehicle for therapy within the dominant biomedical model, thereby "displac[ing] other ways of articulating and evaluating such technique" (83). Circus may play a disruptive role in replacing alternative ways of approaching embodied knowledge on both fronts by promoting physical literacy and inclusivity in schools (Bortoleto et al.), thus serving as a tool for relationship-building and knowledge exchange between diverse stakeholders and challenging positivist epistemologies in academia.

By broadening and refining the definition of *technique* and clearly outlining how embodied practices act as a site of research, Spatz offers both the theoretical grounding and practical foothold to grapple with embodiment as a means of "taking hold and gripping the world" (180). While the path to Spatz's optimistic future of academia is trepidatious—aligning with his epistemological framework and concrete recommendations on elevating the standing of embodied knowledge—it is an important step in our continuous investigations of what circus enables the body to do.

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Author Biography

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