In *What a Body Can Do*, Ben Spatz develops, for the first time, a rigorous theory of embodied technique as knowledge. He argues that understanding technique as both training and research has much to offer current discussions around the role of practice in the university, including the debates around “practice as research.”

Drawing on critical perspectives from the sociology of knowledge, phenomenology, dance studies, enactive cognition, and other areas, Spatz argues that technique is a major area of historical and ongoing research in physical culture, performing arts, and everyday life.

**Ben Spatz** is Lecturer in Drama, Theatre and Performance at the University of Huddersfield. He holds a PhD in Theatre from The Graduate Center, CUNY, and has been a member of the Performance as Research working groups of both IFTR and ASTR. Ben is founder and artistic director of Urban Research Theater since 2004.
Praise for *What a Body Can Do*:

What is taking place when bodies make their way in the world? In this book, Ben Spatz answers this question by providing an atlas of bodily techniques which generates new and vibrant epistemic impulses each chiming with the other. The result is both intense and intensely satisfying.

Nigel Thrift, Vice-Chancellor
University of Warwick

This book is an important contribution to the interdisciplinary field of body studies. It is both deeply personal in its commitments, and deeply academic in its scope and quality. Chasing the performance of philosophy and the materiality of epistemology through its various limbs and organs, Spatz’s provocations continue to demonstrate that the body is “good to think with” as a means for the discovery of new practices.

Dr Chris Shilling, Professor of Sociology, Director of Postgraduate Studies (Research)
University of Kent

In many cultures, especially in the Western world, body and mind are characteristically held separate as ways of understanding the world. Here, Ben Spatz combats this way of thinking, seeking to show that “embodied practice is epistemic”. Carefully weaving among the thickets, Spatz embraces concepts as wide as research, embodiment, performance, language, agency, the public sphere, gender, identity and everyday life … This is a brave story, adroitly told and offers a most valuable addition to the field.

Ronald Barnett, Emeritus Professor of Higher Education
Institute of Education, London

A significant and innovative contribution.

Rick Kemp, Head of Acting and Directing
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

The breadth of Spatz’s reading and application is impressive. *What a Body Can Do* is a useful contribution to the field.

Rhonda Blair, Professor Meadows School of the Arts, SMU
WHAT A BODY CAN DO

Technique as Knowledge,
Practice as Research

Ben Spatz
FOR CALEB REZA
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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...
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.

Joseph Roach
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The area of contemporary thought in which this book intervenes is very lively at the moment. If I were writing it now I would certainly engage with recent works like Michael Schwab’s *Experimental Systems: Future Knowledge in Artistic Research* (2013); John Matthews’s *Anatomy of Training* (2014); Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling’s *Sociology of the Sacred: Religion, Embodiment and Social Change* (2014); and Robin Bauer’s *Queer BDSM Intimacies: Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries* (2014). I will be grateful if this book is received as a contribution alongside such gifts as these. Thanks to the editors of the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* for permission to include material on Stanislavski’s method of physical actions (Chapter 3), a version of which first appeared in that journal. Thanks as well to the Schatz Ornstein Studio (<www.howardschatz.com>), which has provided the cover image for this book: not a line drawing in fact but a black-and-white photograph of a body with paint poured over it. In those lines of dripping paint, I see a metaphorical depiction of the fractally branching pathways that I argue characterize the epistemic territory of embodied technique.

This book is the result of countless conversations, debates, and discussions, as well as untold hours of embodied practice, performance, and training. While I cannot thank everyone whose voices influenced its development, I would like to mention some of those whose impact was most significant. These are first of all the individuals with whom I wrestled intellectually in the development of these ideas, beginning with Maurya Wickstrom, whose guidance, care, and critique substantially defined my experience of doctoral education at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, where this project was initiated. Likewise Professors Judith Milhous, Jean Graham-Jones, David Savran, James Wilson, Deborah Kapchan, and others influenced my formation as a scholar. I am grateful to Paul Allain, Bruce Barton, Sally Ann Ness,
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I want to thank very deeply those who have journeyed with me along a path of artistic discovery and embodied research: especially Massimiliano Balduzzi and Michele Farbman, as well as Beata Zalewska, Iza Mlynarz, Malgosia Szkandera, and Margot Bassett. I thank the participants of two “What a Body Can Do” events: at the 19th Performance Studies International conference (Stanford University, 2013) and in Maurya Wickstrom’s New Performance class (College of Staten Island, 2013); the students at Long Island University who dared to enroll in a new course, Training the Body: Perspectives in Movement, which I saw as a first step towards shaping a possible new field; and Laura Tesman, for giving me extraordinary teaching opportunities at Brooklyn College. I am grateful to Movement Research, Ximena Garnica and Shige Moriya of Leimay/Cave, and Peter Sciscioli for supporting my artistic work in New York City over the past decade. I also owe a profound debt of gratitude to the many teachers and artists in both dance and theatre whose work has profoundly affected my practice and my life. During two years in Poland (2003–2005), I was transformed by my encounters with Włodzimierz Staniewski and the actors of the Gardzienice Theatre Association, with Rena Mirecka, and with the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, as well as others who passed through the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław. Many thanks to Grzegorz Ziolkowski and Jarosław Fret for hosting me there. Although I never met him, I must thank Jerzy Grotowski for affecting so many lives that have so deeply affected mine. I want also to mention Pedro Alejandro, Cheryl Cutler, and Hope Weissman, my undergraduate mentors at Wesleyan University; and Gerry Speca, whose theatre classes at the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School gave me my first taste of physically dynamic, formally experimental, ensemble-based theatre.

My current teaching, practice, and research is supported by the University of Huddersfield and by my extraordinary colleagues, especially the Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research led by Franc Chamberlain and Deb Middleton. The development of this book was made possible by the editorial guidance of Talia Rogers, Harriet Affleck, and Ben Piggott. Thanks to James Thomas and Jennifer Parkin.
for proofreading. I am grateful to Joe Roach for agreeing to write the Foreword even after reading my critique of the final pages of *The Player’s Passion*, a book that has long inspired me with its mixture of historical rigor and critical verve. My deepest thanks go to my parents, Morris Rabinowitz and Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz, and to my sister, Rebecca Rabinowitz. Their love and wisdom formed me as a person and continue to shape me today. Ben Blum-Smith I count as a brother in all but blood, with whom I talked for years about these questions before I knew their names. Finally I thank Michelle Mina Goldsmith for being my partner in life throughout these varied years. We have long been each other’s keepers and now together are responsible for the formation of a new being, Caleb Reza Goldsmith-Spatz, to whom this book is dedicated.

Ben Spatz
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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:
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
Wrocław. Numerous experiences during those two years profoundly affected my understanding of art, knowledge, and practice, but one memory will do for now: It was late summer in Gardzienice and a group of young actors and apprentices had been rehearsing for several days in the lead-up to an important premiere. Finally, three of the older actors arrived to join us: Tomasz Rodowicz, Elżbieta Rojek, and Dorota Porowska. The force of their deeply embodied singing transformed the atmosphere in an instant, almost taking my breath away. Where did such power come from? At that moment, I felt like Lawton in the concrete basement: “That’s what I want, right there.” I felt the same thing a year later when I worked with Rena Mirecka, one of the founding members of Jerzy Grotowski’s Theatre Laboratory, and again the next summer when I spent three weeks in Moscow with the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards from Pontedera, Italy. Although I did not continue to work directly with any of these practitioners, my encounters with them began a substantial journey in embodied technique, of which the present volume is one product.2

What knowledge is contained and transferred in the studios, rehearsal rooms, and concrete basements of embodied practice? In their introduction to Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge, D. S. Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge remind us that the “arts” in question are not reducible to their martial application. “Supposedly people go to martial arts studios to fend off attackers in the street, but practitioners know that this is an inadequate explanation of the phenomena” (2011: 6). The point is easily transferable to the performing arts: Supposedly people join theatre and dance companies to perform in front of paying audiences, but practitioners know that this is an inadequate explanation of the phenomena. For me, as for Lawton, the desire to join a particular community of practice was at once more immediate and less spectacular than touring a show or becoming a professional actor. What is it that makes a person latch onto a certain kind of embodied technique and dive into it, devoting years or decades to a particular practice? Why are we drawn to develop certain embodied capacities—whether physical or vocal, therapeutic or presentational, affective or athletic—and not others? What kind of recognition takes place when a particular area of technique strikes us to the core?

Three more stories to go …

While writing this book, I taught introductory acting to students at multiple schools in the City University of New York. These classes brought together individuals with diverse backgrounds and interests, many of whom had never studied or practiced theatre and were unlikely to do so in the future. I soon realized that it made no sense to think of
such classes as leading towards possible acting careers. Instead, I began to ask myself how I would teach Acting 1 as a basic unit of general education, like English composition or algebra. The assumption is that introductory courses in writing and mathematics impart knowledge that will be useful to students in all careers and all walks of life. What if the same assumption were made about performance technique? Acting classes are often justified in terms of building confidence and creativity, or of helping students become more comfortable in their bodies. These are fine justifications, but I want to affirm that transformations like these take place through the transmission of knowledge in the form of technique. Students become confident, creative, and comfortable because they learn how to maintain eye contact and stillness; how to read the body language and rhythmic patterns of others; how to activate emotional and physiological energies in their own bodies; how to develop, practice, and repeat a score. Acting class is not something other than the transmission of knowledge. It is, or it can be, an introduction to embodied technique as an epistemic field.

With this in mind, I once proposed—during a graduate course on Global Political Theatre and Performance—that we consider the politics of embodied practice as distinct from those of representation and spectacle. I asked: What if some of the most effective political theatre unfolds, like yoga classes, away from the public eye? What if the politics of actor training are not limited to how we prepare young actors for the stage, but intersect directly with other kinds of embodied pedagogies by revealing and foreclosing possible avenues of everyday practice? Could this not suggest a very different understanding of how theatre embodies politics? A fellow student objected to my suggestion: “But no one would see it.” No one would see it. As if seeing were the only way to be transformed by technique. As if the enactment of technique in one’s own body could not be just as transformative as seeing it practiced by someone else—or even more so. As if politics were only a matter of representation. My peer’s assumption reflects a bias in theatre and performance studies that privileges the phenomena of (public) spectatorship as a site for social intervention. But there are many dimensions of theatrical practice, from experimental actor training to applied theatre and drama therapy, that do not rely upon public spectacle to find their meaning. We cannot afford to assume that the politics of practice are the same as those of representation. Another language is needed.

Two more stories …
In his seventies, my father began taking lessons in taijiquan. He told me that sometimes, when he is waiting in New York City’s Penn Station—that infamously stressful train station—he goes into a corner and makes
some of the movements from his taiji class. “It’s not really taiji,” he said, “just some of the warm-ups.” He is not trying to attract attention. There is no sense of display in his actions. They are for him. They work to separate him from the bother and bustle of the station, giving him mental clarity, focus, and relaxation. Another thing my father does is recite poetry in his mind. This is less visible, less physical, but still a kind of embodied technique. Both the taiji and the poetry have specific cultural and historical lineages. Having studied English poetry of the seventeenth century, my father knows many poems from that era by heart. The taiji is newer for him. I don’t know the lineage of his teachers and, at such a basic level, it hardly matters. In fact, it does not matter whether what he is doing is “really” taiji. Nor does the cultural or representational value of these forms explain how they serve him in that moment, when he is waiting in the station for his track to be announced. In that context, technique functions not as cultural sign but as the structure of embodied repetition. It serves him and, in another sense, he serves it—the poetry no less than the taiji.

Finally ...

A story from Jewish lore: A wise person instructed that the words of a song of praise should be “written on the heart.” Someone asked: “Why is it written ‘on’ the heart and not ‘in’ the heart?” The wise person answered: We do not have the power to write it in our hearts. All we can do is to write it on our hearts, and then, after some time, it may sink in. Maybe, the tenth time we sing that song, it glows for us. But maybe, the eleventh time, that glow is gone. We cannot control what is inside the heart, only what we inscribe upon it. My sister told me this story. When she sings in temple, she says, sometimes it has a golden quality, sometimes not. But when the quality is there, she says, “It has something to do with the fact that I know I’ll be there again the next week.” Practice. Repetition. In the inscription written “on” the heart, I see Konstantin Stanislavski’s caution to the actor, which Grotowski repeated: We cannot control our emotions. What we do—that we can control (Richards 1995: 103). But the inscription written on the heart is also Foucault’s inscription: the body inscribed by instruments of power, referred to by Judith Butler as “a site where regimes of discourse and power inscribe themselves, a nodal point or nexus for relations of juridical and productive power” (Butler 1989: 601). How might we reconcile these different notions of bodily inscription? How can we understand the depths at which technique changes us through practice, over time and sometimes radically? What is the relationship between knowledge and power, in the practice of embodied technique? Do we sing the song, or does the song sing us?
These stories concern experiences of embodiment: my own as well as those of my friends and family, teachers and colleagues. However, I am not mainly interested here in “experience.” Instead, what concerns me is transmissible knowledge. In these stories, people are learning what bodies can do: Lawton training jujitsu in his thirties; my encounter with embodied song in Gardzienice; my students learning basic acting at the City University of New York; my father starting taiji practice in his seventies; my sister singing Jewish songs at Hillel. What can a body do? It is a practical question, a question of doing. It provokes not one answer but hundreds, thousands, millions of answers—answers that take the form of technique.

From performance to practice

As these stories show, training in the craft of performance is at the heart of my project. But the questions at hand also extend beyond the performing arts, requiring us to map the much larger territory of embodied practice. As a result, the approach taken here is distinct from one that would examine “Theatre among the Other Arts,” as in the title of a recent session of the Mellon School of Theater and Performance Research at Harvard University (2014). My topic instead is acting among other embodied practices. I am not concerned here with “art” in its contemporary sense, except in the specific chapter that addresses the performing arts. After all, as philosopher Jacques Rancière reminds us, “art in the singular has only existed for two centuries” (2004: 52). Here, I prefer to suspend that singular notion of “art” in favor of an older understanding of “arts” as fields of craft, technique, and knowledge. This theoretical move suggests a recontextualization of the performing arts alongside healing, martial, and ritual arts, all of which are defined by the embodied encounter of bodies rather than by the spectator’s encounter with an art object that may or may not be “live.”

By pulling theatre away from its common associations with film, literature, and painting, and examining it instead as a site for embodied practice, I hope to escape the apparent dependence of theatre upon an allegedly “public” sphere in which spectacles are presented to a general audience. The result is a book in which acting serves as a central example, but which is not ultimately about acting or theatre.

In this book, I critique two dominant trends in performance studies: one that romanticizes performance as exceptionally ephemeral and unavailable to discourse, verging on the magical; and another that sees everyday performances (or “performativity”) as thoroughly socially
constructed, thereby replacing freedom with habit and choice with the unconscious reproduction of social norms. The concept of technique, as I understand it, resolves this dilemma by conceiving of both specialized and everyday practices in terms of their knowledge content. Recent discussions of acting, like Phillip Zarrilli’s *Psychophysical Acting* (2009) and John Lutterbie’s *Toward a General Theory of Acting* (2011), draw upon a wide range of critical and philosophical theories, including many that I also consider here. I find much to praise in these, as well as in Simon Shepherd’s reframing of theatre as “an art of bodily possibility” and “a place which exhibits what a human body is, what it does, what it is capable of” (2006: 10, 1). However, rather than proposing a theory of acting or of theatre, this book offers a theory of embodied practice within which acting might be recontextualized. In spirit, my project is closer to John Matthews’s *Training for Performance: A Metadisciplinary Account* (2011), which examines actor training alongside physical therapy and monastic discipline; Richard Sennett’s history of artisan expertise in *The Craftsman* (2009); Carrie Noland’s analysis of gesture in *Agency and Embodiment* (2009); and even Peter Sloterdijk’s *You Must Change Your Life* (2013), which calls for a return to “the practicing life” in the context of a sweeping history of “anthropotechnics” from antiquity to the present. There is much overlap of concern in these works, although none proposes an epistemology of practice in the sense developed here.

Some months after returning from Poland, I found myself alone in the studio, called there by a need to encounter myself through what I would now call the embodied technique of *song-action*. In the studio, I learned the value of articulating my desires in technical terms: making that crucial translation from a deep and inchoate impulse to a task that could be directly attempted. Soon I felt called to answer the question, posed by myself and others: What is happening in this room? What is taking place? How is this similar or different to what has taken place in Gardzienice, or in Grotowski’s Theatre Laboratory, or in Lawton’s concrete basement, or in an urban yoga studio? Is this theatre or therapy, spirituality or research? In struggling to articulate my practice, a crucial point emerged for me when “technique” and the “technical” crossed over from my studio practice into my scholarly writing. At that point I began to think about acting and other practices in terms of the technique that structures them, and I have never stopped doing so. I hope my conclusion and central thesis—that embodied practice is structured by technique at every level—may suggest to the reader some new ways of thinking about structure and agency, discipline and creativity, vocation and identity.
Embodiment and sustainability

The practices that concern me here are *embodied*. But a clarification is in order: In this context, “embodiment” absolutely does not refer to a distinction between mind and body. As Chapter 1 of this book demonstrates, even scientists no longer believe that the mind can be separated from the body, while in the humanities and social sciences the mind/body dualism of Descartes has long been discredited. My assumption here is that mind and body are holistically intertwined—or rather, following current trends in cognitive studies, that mind is an emergent property of body, just as body is the material basis for mind. Thought and language are fully embodied processes. Therefore, when I refer to “embodiment” and “embodied practice” throughout this book, I mean to include all of the following: thought, mind, brain, intellect, rationality, speech, and language. While “body” or “bodily” could be taken to mean only that which is physical, such as movement and gesture, I use “embodied” to indicate a wider territory: everything that bodies can do. In addition to the physical, this space of possibility includes much that we might categorize as mental, emotional, spiritual, vocal, somatic, interpersonal, expressive, and more. The important distinction here is then not between mind and body, but rather between *embodiment*—inclusive of mind—and the world-changing, epoch-defining, but historically very recent advances in technology that characterize our present global situation.

In basing my argument on a distinction between *technique* and *technology*, I realize that I am swimming against the tide with respect to some current theoretical trends that understand bodies and technologies as so thoroughly enmeshed as to be inextricable or even indistinguishable. Elizabeth Grosz, for example, has written:

Anything that comes into contact with the surface of the body and remains there long enough will be incorporated into the body image—clothing, jewelry, other bodies, objects ... External objects, implements, and instruments with which the subject continuously interacts become, while they are being used, intimate, vital, even libidinally cathected parts of the body image.

*(Grosz 1994: 80)*

Grosz is not alone in suggesting that the human body is inextricably bound up with its tools and technologies. Today it seems obvious that, from genetic engineering to the ways in which our homes and vehicles shape our physical bodies, no clean or sharp line can be drawn between embodiment and technology. As Jennifer Parker-Starbuck observes in
Cyborg Theatre: “Our daily operations are surrounded by, immersed in, and/or intersect with technology” (2011: 4). How then can I hope, even theoretically, to set aside technology—from clothing and jewelry to more complex “objects, implements, and instruments”—in order to focus on embodied technique? Has not each of us long since become a cyborg, a “hybrid of machine and organism” (Haraway 2004: 7)? Are not recent critical turns—like those hinging on affect, practice, or “somatechnics” (Sullivan and Murray 2009)—intended precisely to highlight the inherent fusion of human and tool, society and machine?

There are at least two ways to develop a theoretical distinction between embodied technique and technology. The first is to see the prioritization of embodiment as part of the phenomenological attitude, or “reduction,” defined as a set of “cognitive and pragmatic techniques” that work continually to return us to the primacy of lived experience as the basis of all knowledge and understanding (Depraz et al. 2003: 184). This attitude does not imply a final rejection of technology or scientific knowledge; it is rather a question of where to begin. In the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible” (2002: xviii–xix). The phenomenological move distinguishes between the direct, embodied experience of life and the mentally constructed world in which we assume we live. To place embodiment before technology is then to remind ourselves that machines, no matter how powerful their effects, involve us only to the extent that they make contact with our experience through the necessary medium of embodiment. From the common chair to the most complex industrial machines, the meaning of any technology can be defined as its effect upon embodied technique. Perhaps more than any other philosophical tradition, phenomenology offers an approach to reality that begins from embodiment. For this reason, it has been taken up by many theorists of theatre, dance, and performance, as well as thinkers of everyday life. In the present context, however, I also want to consider a more specifically contemporary and urgent rationale for distinguishing between technique and technology.

In the first part of the twenty-first century, exponential advances in technology, and the population increases they enable, pose specific dangers to the ecological balance that sustains our and other species on earth. In this sense, an engagement with embodied technique can be seen as an ecopolitical rather than purely philosophical move. As important as it is, Grosz’s point about the incorporation of objects into the body “image” leaves out crucial material differences in the (re)production processes that give rise to bodies and technologies, allowing what is
essentially the consumer’s ignorance of production under capitalism to go unchallenged. For it is only by ignoring the temporal trajectories of bodies and objects, and their ecologies of production, that one can imagine a total loss of boundaries between the embodied and the technological. In fact, while there is ample precedent for the human species living in ecological balance with its natural environment, there is no such precedent for the sustainability of energy-intensive, high-tech, “developed” societies like those we see today. This does not mean that technology is bad or even suspect. It simply means that our “cyborg” nature does not (yet) entitle us to dissolve the conceptual differences between biology, ecology, and technology. Only from a position of historically unprecedented wealth and privilege—much of which may not be sustainable in the long run—can the integration of bodies and technologies appear as a foregone conclusion rather than a simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying proposition.

Today, more than ever, the distinction between what bodies can do and what bodies can make or build demands close and urgent attention. No essentialism or primitivism is therefore needed in order to place special value on embodiment and embodied practice—only a historical sense of just how recent our technologies are in comparison with the ecology of bodies. We do not need to “return” to the body so much as to locate it, to sort it apart from its recent material products, and to maintain a critical awareness of where our objects come from. I would very much support an investigation of technology that addressed its continual impact on human and other life forms, starting with the embodied labor that produces it. Such an analysis would avoid the fetishization of technology that allows us to ignore the role of embodied technique in the production process, or which renders technology transparent by romanticizing its interaction with bodies in technologically advanced societies (see Note 4 above). If anything, the increasing technologization of the world calls for a renewed focus on embodied technique. Far from being unrelated to technology, specialized embodied practices like martial arts, dance, sport, and live performance play an increasingly important role in technological societies and may perhaps be understood as part of a general reaction to the increasing presence of advanced technologies in every aspect of life. Such practices may be seen as calling for a less technological world, but perhaps what they really call for is a more sustainable world in which technology figures differently.

It would of course be naïve simply to equate embodied practices with sustainable ones. As Allison Hui points out, an apparently sustainable and ecologically “green” practice like Ashtanga yoga—discussed at length in Chapter 2 of this book—can be negatively offset by carbon-intensive
practices, like international air travel, to which it may be linked. In this respect, the “mass migration of yoga students contrasts sharply with the low levels of travel and resource consumption that are needed for everyday yoga practice” (in Shove and Spurling 2013: 182). While the practice of yoga may itself be low-tech and virtually carbon-neutral, it becomes carbon-intensive and drastically unsustainable when combined with regular trips to the global centers of yoga training. Karl Georg Høyer makes a similar point about the unintentional ironies of what he calls the “travelling circus of climate change,” in which well-intentioned academics generate much higher than average levels of energy consumption and carbon emissions as they jet from country to country to attend conferences dedicated to slowing climate change (in Bhaskar et al. 2010: 227). We cannot therefore look to embodied practice—whether physical or discursive—to save us in any simple way from the social and material crisis of climate change. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to investigate possible alliances between embodied and sustainable practice, insofar as the former re-centers effort around the capacities of bodies and in this sense may be fundamentally aligned and allied with the goal of sustainability.

Placing embodied technique in this context gives new meaning to what Peter Brook called “the empty space” (1968) of theatrical play. It has been noted in response that there is no such thing as an empty space. An empty room still has a floor. A naked actor still has to eat. Moreover, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o observes, “the performance space is never empty ... It is always the site of physical, social, and psychic forces in society” (1997: 13). Yet for those of us engaged in practices that foreground the possibilities of embodiment—whether in the performing arts or in other contexts—the contemporary turn to embodiment remains ethically and politically salient. This is at least in part because the empty spaces of theatre, dance, yoga, and martial arts studios across the globe are not neutral with respect to sociopolitical concerns, nor are they generically “empty.” Rather, these spaces have been actively emptied. The numerous and varied items—books, furniture, computers, etc.—that fill so many of our rooms today have been conscientiously removed. Such intentionally “emptied spaces” are zones in which technology has been cleared away, in order to bring forth and make space for embodied technique.

**Methodology and chapters**

This book is intended as a work of performance philosophy and the philosophy of practice. Its methodology is perhaps closest to Deleuze
and Guattari’s understanding of philosophy as “the creation of concepts.” According to Massumi, Deleuze’s

image for a concept is not a brick, but a “tool box.” He calls his kind of philosophy “pragmatics” because its goal is the invention of concepts that do not add up to a system of belief or an architecture of propositions that you either enter or you don’t, but instead pack a potential in the way a crowbar in a willing hand envelops an energy of prying … The question is not: is it true? But: does it work?

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987: xv)

With this in mind, I have tried to develop concepts with which something productive can be done. Ideally, the reader will come away with a sense of new projects in the offering, or new ways to articulate current projects that may result in a shift of direction or emphasis. Above all, I hope that the ideas contained here will be of use to those who wish to articulate the complexity and importance of embodied knowledge and practice in the world today.

As with any project, there are doubtless gaps and failures. One notable absence is the lack of an explicit discussion of spirituality. I don’t think I have left questions of spirit out of this book, although I do not address them directly. I intend for the reader to be able to engage with my arguments without making assumptions about the relevance of spirituality to the practices discussed. Peter Sloterdijk has recently declared that “religion does not exist”; there are only “variously misinterpreted anthropotechnic practice systems” (2013: 84). We do not have to follow Sloterdijk that far in order to recognize the importance of embodied technique in all religions and spiritualities, to the extent that these are defined not only by orthodoxy—right belief—but also by “orthopraxy”—right action (Bell 2009: 191). In a sense, this book can be read as an attempt to explicate the spiritual in technical terms, or at least to provide some foundations for such a project. In this I follow Grotowski, who provides one of the introduction’s epigraphs: Everything that can be said about spiritual things can be translated into the language of master techniques (Grotowski 1990). As Jean Graham-Jones pointed out to me, Grotowski does not suggest that spirituality itself is synonymous with technique. Rather, it is the desire to render spirituality in words that brings us to the language of technique. Steeped in a lifetime of embodied research (see Chapter 3), Grotowski’s assertion may be an appropriate counterpoint to Deleuze’s philosophic inquiry. Each