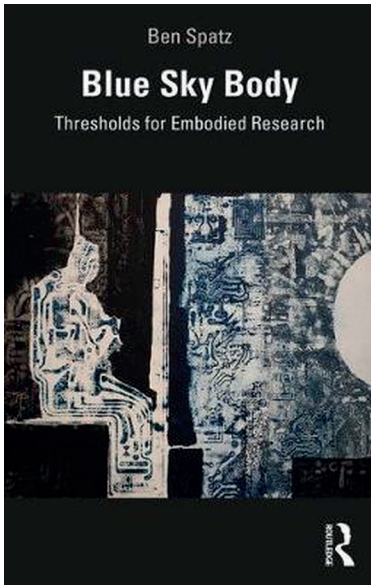


SPATZ, Ben.

***Blue Sky Body,  
Thresholds for Embodied Research.***



Oxon: Routledge, 2020, 305 p.  
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I remember a Facebook message that Ben Spatz posted when he was finalizing the manuscript of *Blue Sky Body, Thresholds for Embodied Research*, in which he questioned if he could permit himself to include a diversity of styles and registers (from diary fragments to performance scripts and interviews to academic essays)

in what is supposed to be first and foremost an academic publication, a state of the art of embodied research within academia, performance studies in particular.

Let me answer his question, just having finished reading the book. If academic writing on artistic or embodied research wants to survive in an age where our 'writing way of thinking' will be complemented or maybe even replaced by the 'video way of thinking' (the latter being one of the terms Spatz elaborates on in his book), it will have to diversify its languages and styles into a more open, horizontal, rhizomatic way of composing and editing, that will inspire the readers/researchers to create their own journeys.

This is exactly what *Blue Sky Body* accomplishes. In six well-defined sections (*City, Song, Movement, Theater, Sex, Document and Politics*) Spatz addresses all major topics of the contemporary debates in the performing arts in academia, artistic practice as research and embodied research in particular. Each section ends with a longer, more traditional academic essay that offers a very personal (both in its references and its own synthesis), highly articulated and very useful epistemological frame to reflect upon, to share and to discuss a major topic in the current debates, both in the artistic and academic communities. For instance, the prevailing power unbalances in gender and the

need to think and work with non-binary models (in the section on *Sex*) or the need to further de-colonialize academia and our way of thinking (in the section on *Politics*).

These major, critical essays written over a period of ten years are introduced by shorter *Fragments*, more diverse in nature and scope and covering more than twenty years of practice, allowing Spatz' academic voice to integrate with his artistic one. Each body of text is introduced by a short editorial, framing both the historical origin and present-day relevance of the fragment for the author and revealing an open, but rigorous editorial process in both the selection and overall composition of the book.

It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss and evaluate all the sections as it would require not only a critical reflection but also a practice to apply and test the concepts and practical tools Spatz offers, over an extended period. In what follows I will limit myself to the longer opening essay *Thresholds*, which is a chapter on its own that frames the whole collection. It elaborates on the five epistemological 'phases or moments of knowledge and being' which allow Spatz to analyze and reflect on every creative journey into the unknown, whether artistic or academic: *field*, *object*, *threshold*, *technique*, *principle* and to conclude the cycle again *field*. Spatz defines these five concepts as "phases of knowledge and being",

which define a cyclical journey "describing the movements of learning, research, pedagogy and performance" (Spatz 1):

What I offer is not a fixed ontology, but more like an onto-epistemological toolkit, which at present contains five items that are already recognizable from contemporary thought and which I here resituate in a particular relationship as points along a journey. (Spatz 6)

Spatz starts with the concept of a *field* as a relatively stable (hence static) form of shared knowledge. For this field to become graspable, in order that it can be taught for instance, it requires some form of condensation or reduction. It needs some *object*-ification. This 'object' that stands out as a landmark, needs to transform again. It has to become a *threshold*, a passageway we no longer observe from a distance, but where we want to go through, "a place of non-mastery, of experimentation, of the encounter with the unknown"; "This threshold is never simply a place of liminality but always also a gateway to specific new possibilities." At the other side of this threshold, we start a new "dance of practice", where "in order to get from the not-yet-known to the known-and-forgotten, we must past through the moment of conscious articulation, the moment in which something is rendered technical" (Spatz

25). The latter was the main topic of Spatz' previous book, *What A Body Can Do* (2015) in which he defined *technique* as the structure or knowledge content of practice. Technique allows for the new knowledge to become slowly sedimented. It literally traces new neurological pathways and reinforces them through repetition. "When technique is trained to the point of automaticity, it becomes sedimented as principle" (Spatz 34). The hidden *principles* of the fields we live and move through challenge us to unearth and deconstruct them. Eventually we will "find ourselves in a field again, but it is a different field. How did we get there?"

Embodiment as first affordance' is 'a field of fields, a manifold, out of which individual fields sometimes rise up and poke out, sharp as objects, and sometimes remain hidden as earth, sedimented as rock, implicit as principle.  
(Spatz 40)

My crude summary doesn't give full credit to Spatz' thinking, which is much more diverse and unfolds in many different directions. In order to avoid "spiraling out into an untenably broad philosophical review" each concept is discussed using two different authors as references – "one for its critical and philosophical treatment of the concept and another for offering a concrete example and case study" (Spatz 8). They include

Isabelle Stengers' cosmopolitics; Gloria Anzaldúa's border theory; Peter Sloterdijk's anthrotechnics and Sarah Ahmed's queer phenomenology. As such the opening essay resembles and repeats the rhizomatic structure of the whole book, embedding a wide variety of independent but interconnected topics and it becomes itself an example of the interdisciplinary intersectionality with which Spatz concludes this essay. Spatz' concepts aren't specific points on a map or timeline but moments/spaces where our knowledge transforms. A transformation, which is similar to the formation of a landscape in that it is constantly moving and that we have to be careful not to get stuck in any of its phases.

Spatz' book inspires and opens a lot of new pathways of inquiry for the reader, without prescribing or dictating. I have only one minor criticism: Spatz is very smart and sometimes too clever in his dialogue with his sources. At such moments, such as in the essay *The Video Way of Thinking*, where he dialogues with Agamben's use of *bios* and *zoe*, he falls back into the older paradigm of academic writing where one is more showing off one's vanitas in arguing than one's lucidity. Spatz seems to be aware of this himself as the introductory, editorial note indicates: "I find the style here somewhat stilted, due to the influence of Giorgio Agamben, to whose 'thought' (that is, writing) this piece responds. I seem to have

picked up here, from Agamben, the habit of making bold generalizations that blur the line between history and ontology” (Spatz 221). Most of the times however Spatz’ lucidity luckily takes the upper hand and his language, being both clear and well-defined, can not only be understood but also applied and embodied.

GUY COOLS