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Choreography as Research:
Iteration, Object, Context

Chapter contribution to
Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader
eds. Jo Butterworth and Liesbeth Wildschut

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Biography

Ben Spatz is Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre and Performance and a member of the Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research at University of Huddersfield. Ben's book, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research* (Routledge, 2015), examines the relationship between training and research in embodied practices of physical culture, performing arts, and everyday life. Ben has toured and performed with the Gardzienice Theatre; presented original performances at Abrons Arts Center, Movement Research Festival, Performance Mix Festival, Lincoln Center Rubenstein Atrium, and other venues in New York City and elsewhere; and been invited to speak at the European Theatre Research Network in Kent, the British Library in London, the Centre for Performance Research in Falmouth, the Martial Arts Studies Conference in Cardiff, and the University of the Arts in Helsinki. Ben was recently selected as a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellow with the project 'Judaica: An Embodied Laboratory for Song-Action' (2016-2018).

The searching movement

There is great interest these days in applying scientific research methods to dance and other embodied practices (for example, see Schmalzl and Kerr 2016). That is hardly surprising, given how important the discoveries of technological science are to the world we live in. In this essay, I explore a different pathway. How does science work? Through what processes do the sciences generate new knowledge? Arguably, if we want to understand how science works, scientists are not the people to ask. Scientists can tell us how molecules and particles and chemicals work, but who can tell us how scientists work? I have argued (Spatz 2015) that social analyses of science — the field of social epistemology — have as much to offer our understanding of embodied practice as science does. When technoscience looks at embodied practices like dance, it follows its usual approach of reduction and division: It sees bodies and body parts, heart rates and brainwave patterns, muscles and tendons, statistics and other quantitative measures. This is very different from what social epistemology sees when it looks at embodied practice. Social epistemology (Schatzki et al. 2001) studies how practice is structured by knowledge. When it looks at dances and dancers, it sees styles and schools, practices and techniques, social processes of transmission and innovation, invented traditions and traditions of invention. Above all, social epistemology sees dances and dancers as *epistemic,* as knowable but never fully known, constantly unfolding. Rather than trying to pin down a dance, social epistemology treats it as a field of knowledge that increases rather than decreases in complexity the more we study it. A social epistemology of dance would examine the objects that interest dancers rather than those that interest scientists. It would do so in a way that brings a particular kind of rigor to those objects, accounting for both their corporeality — what social epistemology calls *realism* — and their social construction. In this chapter, I begin to develop such an account.

Social epistemology offers new ways of thinking about bodies, practices, disciplines, technologies, knowledge, training, and more. What can it tell us about choreography as the structuring of human movement? We can begin with a few quotations from Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, a German historian of science. Although Rheinberger is talking about scientific laboratory research, such as that which led to our present understanding of the DNA molecule, his words and descriptions may strike choreographers as surprisingly relevant or even familiar. In fact, Rheinberger begins one of his meditations on research with a quote from art historian George Kubler: 'Each artist works on in the dark, guided only by the tunnels and shafts of earlier work, following the vein and hoping for a bonanza, and fearing that the lode may play out tomorrow' (2007: 82).[1] From this, Rheinberger goes on to analyze the 'art of exploring the unknown' in terms that may be applied equally to art and science. What exactly, he asks, are the 'tunnels and shafts of earlier work'? Is this just a colorful metaphor for the feeling of being lost, or does the image of branching pathways suggest a more profound truth about the research process? To better articulate what research is, Rheinberger focuses on the relationship between the old and the new. He asks how new discoveries come about, and this leads him to acknowledge that 'one never starts at the beginning, but stands at the end of the path that others have already followed. We have always already left much — perhaps even the most — behind us. And that determines the point at which we are standing, and it determines what we are able to see from this point.' In this way, Rheinberger states, 'one can characterize the research process as a searching movement that takes place along the boundary between knowledge and ignorance' (86).

In suggesting here that choreography can be a kind of research, I want to illuminate the sensation of movement that Rheinberger describes. As dancers we are used to the feeling of movement, but Rheinberger's 'searching movement' is not movement in space. Rather, it is movement in and through knowledge. One may run, leap, and twirl for hours, accomplish great athletic and gymnastic feats, and nevertheless have a sensation of drudgery and dullness. On the other hand, one may be almost motionless, testing a subtle new possibility, trying something out, or even making what seems like a mistake, and suddenly taste the thrill of discovery. In research, the sensation of the wind whistling past one's ears may come at the quietest, slowest, or most accidental of moments just as easily as in the throes of dynamic movement or physical risk. This feeling — the feeling of arriving somewhere new, like the first person to walk upon the moon — is not linked to any particular technique or system. It arises from that delicate balance of knowledge and ignorance to which Rheinberger refers. It is the sensation of arriving at the end of known pathways, of encountering a practical possibility that was previously unknown. But in what context? Unknown to whom? And for what purpose? If choreography can be research, what is its relationship to performance?

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[1] For more on Rheinberger and Kubler in the context of artistic research, see Schwab (2013). This is a valuable collection, but its focus on music and visual art limits its relevance to embodied practices like dance.

I propose that choreography can be understood as research on the basis of two distinctions, both drawn from social epistemologists like those cited above. First, technique may be distinguished from practice. While practice indicates a specific and actual moment, located in time and space, technique refers to the knowledge that structures such moments. Second, the technical can be distinguished from the epistemic. Technique then refers exactly to those 'tunnels and shafts of earlier work', the relatively reliable pathways that allow us to arrive in the same epistemic location as someone else. The epistemic, on the other hand, is the potential knowledge that borders upon but is not (yet) included in the technical. Some of the epistemic will eventually become known and will be incorporated into the technical.[2] The rest of it will remain unknown, ungrasped, part of the complex monolith of practice. Neither known nor unknown, the epistemic is fuzzy and unfolding because we cannot clearly distinguish between the soon-to-be-technical and the embedded-in-practice. From these two distinctions we emerge with three concepts:

1) **practice,** understood as situated moments lived and experienced;

2) **technique / the technical,** knowledge that structures practice and which allows us to compare moments of practice to one another across time and space; and

3) **the epistemic,** that territory of the unknown which is closest to us, just on the edge of grasping, almost but not quite known.

These concepts should not be treated as final or conclusive. Like any concepts, they are analytical techniques in their own right, hence available for appropriation and transformation. In what follows I use these concepts to analyze three choreographic moments, each of which also serves to illustrate an additional concept that may help us understand choreography as research: *iteration, object, context*. Of these three examples, only one refers to the work of a choreographer in the conventional sense. The other two examples are chosen because of how they productively extend the concept of the 'choreographic function' (Martin 1998: 223n2) beyond its usual domain. They do this by tracing lines of technique towards the epistemic.

Iteration

'GO! GO! GO!' The wiry dance teacher pressed herself against the corner of the dance studio as if she intended to launch each of us across the floor with her own body. One by one, and sometimes in pairs or trios, we crossed the studio on its diagonal, executing the simplest of ballet steps. It is a familiar scene, but there was something different about this introductory class at Wesleyan University in 1997. The steps were commonplace, but our engagement with them was not. Many of the students in that room had never had any formal dance training before and many never would again. Yet somehow, as we crossed the floor to the vibrations generated by an old vinyl record player, we leapt through each movement as though we had been training for years. It must be only an illusion, in my memory, that all of us — students of dance, theatre, film, biology, classics — could miraculously execute one *grand jeté* after another. The point is that, although we were just beginners (impossibly late beginners from a 'serious' ballet perspective), we had no sense of trying and failing to meet an external ideal. Absent from that room was any sense of ballet as a towering cultural artifact, a heavy heritage to which we could only fail to measure up. I scarcely even recall being aware that what we were doing was ballet, so different was its feel and taste from my prior experiences of ballet in high school and so seamlessly was it linked to the other elements of the class, which included individual and partner stretching, Alexander technique, and a variety of folk dances including the waltz. Although the studio had a mirrored wall, there was no 'culture of mirror' in the sense of an 'image of correctness, of "getting it," of perfection, that is sought in the mirror' and which 'colonizes' the bodies of dancers in more traditional contexts (Martin 1998: 162). Instead, the opportunity was realized 'for dancing full out to occur that is, in certain respects, less watchful of the self' (163). How did this come about?

I was in that class because someone who had attended Wesleyan ten years earlier had told me that the most important thing I could do in my first year there was to take Cheryl Cutler's 'Introduction to Dance'. 'It changes your life,' she said. I knew on the first day of class that the experience would be powerful.

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[2] 'The epistemic things that ground the experimental sciences emerge from the deposit of the technical and its potential for tinkering. Whence it follows that time and again they lend themselves to becoming reincorporated in that deposit' (Rheinberger 1997: 141). For a more detailed application of Rheinberger's theory of the technical and the epistemic, focusing on a moment of my own solo embodied research practice, see Spatz (forthcoming).

'Laughing afterwards: everyone just knows,' I wrote in my journal. 'I have been to classes that have been this inspirational to me, but I have never been to a class after which every single student agreed so deeply: this is going to be a fantastic experience.' What I could not have understood then was the extent to which the special qualities of Cutler's class were due to the duration and depth of her embodied research in dance pedagogy. In signing up for that class, I was stepping into a thirty-year stream of pedagogical research, a life's work on the question of what it means to 'introduce' dance in a liberal arts context. Cutler began offering dance classes to Wesleyan students — then all male — in 1967 and continued to do so until she retired in 1999 (Wesleyan University 2016). Years later, when I asked her for a syllabus from the amazing course, she told me that for many years she had never had one. The course had evolved, detail by detail, through a process that any reader of Rheinberger would recognize as a kind of research.

> You know, I had this great advantage: I started small. No big overall plan. Nobody oversaw me because, I suppose, they didn't think anything would come of those classes. I just watched my students in class to see what they needed, then made up my next class to meet that need. So it kind of grew organically. I could gauge when to rev up and when to back off, according to their level of energy or exhaustion in the semester. … It was also important not to get too 'heady' — for instance, I always made up my movement combinations to music, so that the combinations 'danced'; but on the other had, I made sure to identify and fit in somewhere in the combination the stuff the students needed to work on.[3]

There is no doubt that what we felt in that room was Cutler's love and passion for movement and for us as individual growing people. But what she describes in this passage is more than love and passion: It is a process of iterative development that allows for a gradual passage from the known into the unknown. Iteration in this sense uses repetition to produce difference. It is neither pure repetition, in which nothing changes (if such a thing is possible), nor random difference, but a system that repeats the technical in order to produce specific kinds of difference and differentiation that draw the researcher into the epistemic. In Rheinberger's terms, 'the temporal coherence of an experimental system is granted by recurrence, by repetition, not by anticipation and forestalling. Its future development, on the other hand, if it is not to end in idling, depends upon groping and grasping for differences' (1997: 75).

When we talk about choreographic repetition, we often think of a movement phrase that is repeated in a performance or of the rehearsal process itself (*répétition* in French). But innovation at the level of technique takes place over decades, not minutes or days. Cutler's 'Introduction to Dance' had such a reliably powerful effect on students because it was tailored and dynamically responsive to them on multiple time scales. The small adjustments she made on a week-to-week basis were incorporated in turn within more gradual changes implemented on an annual basis — in response to the seasons and the academic calendar — and then again into developments unfolding over the course of years and decades.

> The question is, how does the teacher elicit a student's receptivity/interest? Not by dumping loads of information in front of him/her, but by listening to and loving/respecting both the material and the student, and then selecting what out of the masses of possible information might be immediately relevant or accessible to the student in some way. … Once the student's curiosity is roused, the teacher can introduce one progressive challenge after another, drawing the pupil into widening realms s/he never dared/dreamed entering, let alone mastering.[4]

'How does the teacher elicit a student's receptivity/interest?' is a *research question*. Great teachers conduct research by tracing the pathways of known technique into the unknown of its application to particular populations and individuals. In the case of dance teachers, this research involves a kind of choreography. Indeed, teaching is one of the institutional contexts in which embodied research can sometimes — under the right conditions — be sustained for decades. This is one of the pleasures of teaching and it is not so far removed as we might think from what Karin Knorr-Cetina calls the 'libidal' dimension that 'binds experts to knowledge things' and gives research 'a flavor and quality distinctively different from that of routines and habits' (in Schatzki et al. 2001: 186, 182).

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[3] Personal communication with the author, February 2008. For Cutler's thoughts on the application of this approach to a broader set of contexts, see Cutler and Huntsberry (2007).
[4] Personal communication with the author, August 2016.

Pedagogical dance research is rarely recognized in print. Because its explicit aim is to transmit established knowledge rather than to produce new forms, the research dimension of teaching is rarely recognized as such. But if dance technique is 'relational infrastructure', as Judith Hamera claims (2007: 19), then long-term pedagogical experiments ought to be recognized as choreographic research projects. Cutler's pedagogical choreography — or choreographed pedagogy — is a superlative example, but in fact pedagogy is arguably one of the main locations for embodied research in dance. Dance education, in other words, is more than a combination of 'two Foucauldian technologies: those producing a "reformed" and disciplined body … and those of self-refashioning' (30). It is also a site for the development of new possibilities at the edge of old ones and for the adaptation of existing knowledge to new circumstances, both of which are accepted definitions of research. By the time I arrived at Wesleyan, Cutler was offering much more than a survey of introductory dance forms. Twice per week, for two hours each day, she guided us through intimate partner exercises, sweaty ensemble movement, and finally classical floor work with complete attention paid to the entirety of the situation. She manipulated the music, the curtains, and even the room lighting in order to move us along specific energetic and movement pathways. What she offered in that class was not a set of modular units but a choreopedagogical whole, a seamless progression that allowed us to access remarkable transformations within the span of those two hours. This wholeness was developed through research.

Object

At a recent academic workshop on the question of how and when performance can be research, dancer Nicole Peisl and her colleague Lynette Hunter drew a thin rope taut across the length of the room and invited us to follow its slow movement — down to the floor, then gradually up again — with our 'felt sense'. As the rope moved in space, I allowed myself to be moved by it, enacting a kind of kinaesthetic empathy with its inanimate but animated vibrations.[5] The progress of the rope in space was mesmerizing. But just as the dance teacher's research object is not the students themselves, but rather the choreopedagogical technique through which the students pass, the object under investigation in Peisl's workshop intervention was not the rope. Rather it was this 'felt sense', the way in which we were invited to experience and engage with the rope's movement. The term 'felt sense' is one that Peisl is exploring in her doctoral research, drawing on the work of Eugene Gendlin and David Rome and in dialogue with her lifelong experience as a dancer and choreographer, including fifteen years of work with William Forsythe. The formal simplicity of the rope exercise provoked one of the more concentrated moments in the week-long workshop, precisely because what was at stake was not the rope itself but our way — our technique — of relating to it.

Forsythe is perhaps the contemporary choreographer to whom the concept of research is most readily and commonly attached. His work, writes Steven Spier, 'is a body of research conducted through the practice of choreography investigating the most fundamental questions of art' (2011: 3). Again and again, in Spier's edited volume, scholars and practitioners discuss Forsythe's work in terms that would make no sense to a classical choreographer — someone aiming to create the most elegant or effective staging of a story or piece of music — but would be commonplace to a social epistemologist analyzing laboratory science:

> The curiosity about limits is perhaps the vital element in Forsythe's work. What are the possibilities of the dancing body? What is a dance? What is performance? (Roslyn Sulcas in Spier 2011: 18)

> What continues to be a driving force in Forsythe's own company is the idea of a laboratory for research into dance. His pieces develop and incorporate knowledge about dance. … His pieces are, as he once said in a conversation, hypotheses about ballet and dance; his work is an ongoing process of self-reflection and questioning, a process that establishes a field where things can happen without stipulating an outcome. (Gerald Siegmund in Spier 2011: 24)

> For a piece to function, each performer must be willing to experience, to embody, its inherent energies. The process of creation can feel like a failure, struggle, or like exultation. The performers and the choreographer need to be willing to wait, to fail, to not know, to be outrageous, disciplined, clairvoyant. They must be willing to change, to abandon what they understood to be right. (Dana Caspersen in Spier 2011: 95)

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[5] This took place at a session of the Performance as Research Working Group during the 2016 International Federation for Theatre Research conference, held in Stockholm.

Statements like these turn away from the composition of a given piece, let alone the actual movement that appears onstage in a given performance, and focus instead on the epistemic process — the continual, iterative engagement with the unknown — that produces compositions and performances as outputs. This is more than just a shift of emphasis: It is a radical destabilization of the concept of an artistic work. For centuries, the notion of a unique and coherent artistic work has been one of the main legacies of European culture. With the turn towards research, we see this concept deconstructed as the apparent stability of any given artistic work is replaced by the unfolding, iterative instability of an epistemic object.

In the essay cited above, Karin Knorr Cetina discusses the fascination researchers have for the 'unfolding ontology' of epistemic objects, which draw us in precisely because we only partially understand them (in Schatzki et al. 187). It is not difficult to see that these epistemic objects are the broader class to which Forsythe's 'choreographic objects' belong:

> There is no choreography, at least not as to be understood as a particular instance representing a universal or standard for the term. Each epoch, each instance of choreography, is ideally at odds with its previous defining incarnations as it strives to testify to the plasticity and wealth of our ability to re-conceive and detach ourselves from positions of certainty.
>
> Choreography is the term that presides over a class of ideas: an idea is perhaps in this case a thought or suggestion as to a possible course of action. (William Forsythe in Spier 2011: 90)[6]

The main objects of choreography, in other words, are not dances. Rather, the main objects of choreography are what Forsythe refers to as a particular 'class of ideas', that which suggests 'a possible course of action'. Another word for such ideas might be technique — but only if by that we mean both established technique and the technique of the future, which is currently in the process of unfolding out of the epistemic.

Elsewhere, Freya Vass-Rhee refers to these same objects as 'boundary objects': 'objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites' (Susan Star and James Griesemer quoted in Hansen and Callison 2015: 93). The concept of a stable artistic work derives from print culture and the apparent stability and transmissibility of writing as in text, mathematics, or musical notation.[7] Once we begin to focus on embodied practice, there is no 'work' as such. Instead there are practices on different scales: one evening's performance; all the performances that go under a shared name; the practice of a dancer or company as it develops over time; etc. — and there is the technique that structures those practices and according to which they resemble and differ from each other. To take a transversal slice of that technique at one level of detail and call it an original work is at best misleading and at worst disingenuous. There is then a tradeoff in understanding one's choreography as research: The artistic work slips away and along with it the choreographer as independent, individual creator as in the romantic model. In its place is left the kind of emergent discovery, located in a web of knowledge, to which Rheinberger refers. As Vass-Rhee notes, Forsythe is long 'past the period in which he credited each individual dancer as co-choreographer, currently tending to designate pieces as works "by William Forsythe and the Forsythe Company"', a shift that reflects the 'distributed' and materially interwoven research process (101). It might surprise some readers to recall that Martha Graham made similar claims about her choreographic work, 'denying that she … founded a "school of movements"' and asserting: '"I have simply rediscovered what the body can do"' (Martin 1998: 170). Graham had no recourse to the kind of research language that informs contemporary choreography, but she was no less forceful in demanding that we look past the formal movement structure of her work in order to see it as an unfolding research process.[8]

Taken further, we might declare that choreography as research produces dance works — as well as choreographers and dancers — only incidentally. More fundamentally, what research choreography produces is technique. This may seem odd to those for whom technique carries the connotation of backward-looking formalism, but it makes sense as soon as we recognize that the technical is continually changing through an iterative dialectic relationship with the epistemic. Forsythe even articulates a desire to produce choreography without dancers: 'What else, besides the body, could physical thinking look like? … Historically

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[6] Forsythe's individual website (2016) is also called 'Choreographic Objects.'

[7] The major historical and philosophical reading of this history in music is Goehr (1992). It is interesting to compare the concept of the musical work to that of the choreographic work, given their very different relationships to notation.

[8] Assertions of this kind — the denial of technique as form in order to refocus attention on an underlying motivating engagement with the epistemic — are commonplace amongst pioneers of embodied research. I provide several examples from actor/performer training in Spatz (2015: 114-15).

choreography has been indivisible from the human body in action. … Are we perhaps at the point in the evolution of choreography where a distinction between the establishment of its ideas and its traditional forms of enactment must be made?' (in Spier 2011: 91-92). His work provides us with concrete examples of what this could entail. The *Improvisation Technologies* DVD (Kuchelmeister 1999) and the more recent website project 'Synchronous Objects' (Forsythe et al. 2009) use digitization as a way to abstract technique from the specificity of particular bodies. A different strategy is used in Forsythe's installation pieces, such as *White Bouncy Castle* (a huge white bouncy castle) and *Scattered Crowd* (a room packed full of balloons), in which audience members are provoked or compelled by the physical environment to make extradaily movement choices (Spier 2011: 140-44). In these installations, movement technique is shared with participants not through visual appreciation and kinaesthetic empathy but through crafted situations designed to introduce 'a lay audience, through the simplest or even silliest of means, to fundamental conceptual issues about the body in space, and about engendering and composing movement' (141). Both digitization and installation are strategies for articulating choreographic objects without their usual material supports.

According to Pil Hansen, a new generation of contemporary choreographers is working with Performance Generating Systems that are 'even more complex' than those developed by the Forsythe Company in how they balance their inputs and outputs (in Hansen and Callison 2015: 137). The drive to draw new objects from the epistemic is endless, as Karin Knorr Cetina reminds us:

> The lack of completeness of being of knowledge objects goes hand in hand with the dynamism of research. Only incomplete objects pose further questions, and only in considering objects as incomplete do scientists move forward with their work. (in Schatzki et al. 2001: 176)

There is no reason to suspect that this kind of epistemic incompleteness is any less important for research choreographers than it is for scientists.

Context

I descend, with others, down industrial steps and through tunnels both cavernous and cramped, into a basement room located far below the Westbeth Artists Housing complex in Manhattan's West Village. Although we start the journey as a group, the passage splits us apart as we stop to gaze at the extraordinary photographic prints — contemporary interpretations of an ancient burial tradition — that adorn the crumbling grey walls. In them, we see a man embarked upon an otherworldly journey. He is caressed by grass, launched into the air, merging with the sea. Always his dark skin is touched by shimmering gold: wrapped in it, held by it, and ultimately consumed by it. Once inside the basement, a ritual unfolds, a precisely crafted montage of actions and objects. Three figures move, sing, gesture, and enact a series of vignettes between darkness, semidarkness, and threads of light. Sound and presence resonate in the space. Light from multiple sources flickers and partially illuminates the large basement room as if it were a temple. There are wire sculptures, a massive clay jar into which one of the men's heads can be fully submerged, and the same golden eye coverings and gold-ribboned bodywrap we recognize from the photographs. Eventually, too, there are microphones, beer bottles, and a record player. As the piece progresses, its geometry relaxes. By the end the performers stand before us as themselves, chatting and telling dirty jokes.

The premise of director Kaneza Schaal's *Go Forth* is her treatment of the ancient text *Going Forth by Day* — more commonly known as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* — as an archaic theatrical script:

> The 3,000-year-old funerary text is approached as an ancient performance score: excavating the spells and incantations to create a series of burial vignettes, fragments of translation, memory and imagination. Photographic funerary murals usher the audience into a mythological underground landscape. Galvanized by the intimate relationship between black people and death around the world, *Go Forth* paves way for its audience to reflect on their individual and collective mourning processes. (PS122 2016)

Go Forth works on multiple levels, from its unexplicated ritual atmosphere to its juxtaposition of objects that might be found in a museum with those of modern stage tech. 'I wanted an underground space, ideally a maze,' Schaal notes, comparing the 'labyrinthine basement' of Westbeth Artists Housing to the traditional burial grounds she encountered while doing research for the piece in Egypt (Lopate 2015). Only during a talkback after the performance did I learn that the three performers — Justin Hicks, William Nadylam, and

David Hamilton Thomson — came from three different disciplines: music, theatre, and dance respectively.[9] Within the richly textured performance, they operate as a seamless trio. This seamlessness makes it difficult to distinguish between the 'pure' choreography of physical movement or dance that appeared in *Go Forth* and the progressively wider contexts in which we might locate it.[10] While the previous examples highlighted the independent reality of epistemic objects as they emerge through iterative processes, this one points to the inextricability of choreographic objects from their theatrical and cultural contexts.

I would like to have more insight into the creative development that led to *Go Forth*. As compelling as the performance was, I suspect that a window into its process of emergence could be even more precious. But where is the institutional support to create such a framework? When an artist reaches the level of recognition and resources that William Forsythe commands, it becomes possible to begin developing comprehensive documentation strategies to break the work apart and make it available at the level of technique.[11] Far more often, those layers can only be glimpsed through the composite palimpsests of theatrical performance events. *Go Forth* was presented as part PS122's COIL Festival, one of several that now take place in what has become a January explosion of experimental performance festivals in New York City (alongside Under the Radar, Prototype, American Realness, and more). Locals complain, with good reason, about the forced dynamics of such a jam-packed couple of weeks, but for a visitor to the city this is an extraordinary opportunity to see a terrifically wide range of work. Theatres like PS122 and the Public Theatre stretch their resources to give emerging artists and companies proper support during this period. Where then would the time and money come from to support additional layers of documentation that would trace the development of these works over months and years, or reveal the threads of collaboration and cross-pollination that fuel this convergence of creative energies? Even if a young choreographer or creator wanted to archive and document her creative process and the research context for her investigations, what multimedia strategies would be most effective in doing so? How does one capture process — let alone context — on video or on paper?

The meaning of the choreographic objects manipulated in *Go Forth*, from the audience's choreographed descent to Thomson's individual movement sequences, emerges from their situation within the theatricality of the piece, within the overpacked January festival season and in relation to many other cultural contexts. Even without the programme's explicit reference to 'the intimate relationship between black people and death around the world', *Go Forth*'s relationship to contemporary blackness and black identity would be essential to address. Schaal says of the project: 'I was excited to bring together a team of black artists, very different kinds of black. We have dancers and we have writers and we have African Americans and we have Sri Lankan Camaroonian Frenchmen. And so I was excited to make a room where race was a material that was necessarily present and important, but not necessarily the subject of our inquiry' (Lopate 2015). *Go Forth* was one of several performances in the January festival season that traced what Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzales call

> an ontology of blackness that extend[s] beyond race. We wondered, if blackness was no longer stable, what are its performative markers? How can black performances be theorized toward their own ends, even as those ends are dispersed across geographies and historical eras? … Black performance is not static, contained, or geographically specific. There is no locale that designates the origin of 'black' sensibilities because skin colors have always been global and relative. (In DeFrantz and Gonzales 2014: 8-9)

Strikingly for the present context, DeFrantz and Gonzales link contemporary theorizations of blackness to what E. Patrick Johnson has called the '*epistemological* moment of race' (my emphasis), in which 'performance facilitates self- and cultural reflexivity — a knowing made manifest by a "doing"'. We might

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[9] For additional creative credits, see the production webpage at Schaal (2016).

[10] Thomson describes himself as an artist working 'among the intersections of movement, text, sound and song' (2016). When asked about his relationship to 'pure dance', he replies: 'I'm at a point in my life where I like moving and I like dancing, but I'm not a traditional "choreographer" per se. That's not how I think of making work. I don't make up steps to answer questions; instead I look for tasks and structures" (Weeks 2013).

[11] In addition to the published examples mentioned above, the Forsythe Company has produced the custom-built Motion Bank and Piecemaker software for annotating catalogues of performance and rehearsal videos (see Hansen in Hansen and Callison 2015; cf. <motionbank.org>). An earlier key example of a large-scale multimedia project dedicated to articulating the work of a choreographer at the level of evolving technique the Siobhan Davies Dance Archive (see Whatley and Varney 2009; cf <siobhandaviesreplay.com>).

then ask what social epistemology and the epistemology of race — two lineages of thought that respond in different ways to some of the same issues — could learn from each other.

Schaal's staging of an ancient Egyptian religious text resonates in some ways with approaches to spirituality found elsewhere in contemporary black performance: 'The ritualism communicates. … [The performance] offers depth instead of flash, a kind of cumulative spiritualism rather than any "wow" moments.'[12] Yet *Go Forth* is just as clearly marked and influenced by Schaal's work with the Wooster Group, Elevator Repair Service, and other predominantly white New York City experiment theatre companies.[13] The confluence of these lineages perhaps suggests something along the lines of what Royona Mitra, writing about British-Bangladeshi choreographer Akram Khan, dubs 'new interculturalism' (2015). An earlier wave of intercultural theatre, epitomized by Peter Brook's 1985 production of the *Mahabharata*, attempted to bring culturally specific texts to a 'universal' (white) audience by abstracting them from their cultural context. In contrast, the 'new' in Mitra's new interculturalism indicates an approach situated in a hybrid or diasporic cultural context from which it makes a far more politicized claim to universality. For Mitra, Khan is an example of an artist who has actively transformed the 'contemporary' or 'mainstream' (white) dance scene from a distinctively nonwhite position. Works appearing in this new mode reject the division between cultural identification ('other'-ness) and formal innovation by laying undeniable claim to both, thereby helping to shatter the entrenched dichotomy between white-controlled cultural appropriations and ghettoized 'authentic' performances by artists of color.[14] *Go Forth,* we might then say, is as black in its sources and powers as it is universal in its aims and effects. Neither explicitly framed as black performance nor compelled to deny its blackness, it breaks the alignment of university with whiteness and posits a black universal. Its politics are not written on its sleeve but buried like foundations in its ontology.

The possibility to examine how formal choreographic objects operate in and from racially and culturally marked contexts goes along with less evidently political shifts in philosophical thought that allow for the recognition of epistemic objects in general as both materially real and culturally constructed at the same time. Choreographic objects, no more or less than scientific ones, are products of social institutions and processes. Yet they are transmissible from one body to another because they are not merely the inventions of society but also its discoveries. Whether we pay attention to both sides of this differential equation is a matter of power and representation. Forsythe's work, after all, is also intercultural: a merging of (white) US iconoclasm with German stated-funded ballet. This white-on-white contrast is less visible in today's cultural landscape, allowing those who write and think about his work to have the luxury (or illusion) of treating it solely in terms of the formal, epistemic objects it explores, rather than as representative of larger intercultural flows. Awash in whiteness, the border between German and white American identity feels far less urgent today than the still-burning 'color line' in the US. Hence reviews of *Go Forth* necessarily make reference to Schaal's Rwandan heritage and autobiographical experience, while contemporary discussions of Forsythe rarely dissect the multicultural facets of his whiteness.[15] Social epistemology, however, reminds us that even the most rigorously reliable and quantified objects of mathematics and physics are also culturally constructed insofar as the techniques and technologies that allow us to interact with them were developed within specific social circumstances and histories. One of the key points made by sociologists of science has been that scientific objects can and must be 'simultaneously objective, relative, and historical' (Pickering 1995: 33). This is why Mitra can describe Khan as creating 'an organic and syncretic language' (2015: 44). A merely

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[12] From a 2007 review of Reggie Wilson's company by Michael Wade Simpson, quoted in DeFrantz and Gonzales (2014: 109).

[13] Marýa Wethers: 'I define "predominant whiteness" as a phenomenon occurring like the layers of an onion, with some diversity displayed on the outside but greatly decreasing as you look more inward – from the programming on stage (some brown), to the audiences in the house (occasionally brown), to the administrative and technical staff and governing boards behind the scenes (little to no brown).' From 'Thinking from Within', in SLIPPAGE (2015: 15). This booklet contains a cogent set of reflections on the current status of artists of color in US and NYC arts scenes.

[14] Susan Leigh Foster offers a brief history of racist dance classification practices in her introduction to *Worlding Dance* (2009: 2): 'The substitution of the word "world" for "ethnic" … in various labeling practices, such as the music industry and arts programming, has worked euphemistically to gloss over the colonial legacy of racialized and class-based hierarchies of the arts. Ethnic dances — envisioned as local rather than transcendent, traditional rather than innovative, simple rather than sophisticated, a product of the people rather than a genius — are resuscitated and transformed into products of various cultures from around the world." This approach to dance classification is a particular implementation of the European art/culture system, cf. Coombe (1998: 216-25).

[15] Schaal identifies as the 'daughter of a Midwesterner and Rwandese immigrant' who seeks 'to ignite the sensory and linguistic capacities that construct memory, reason and imagination, and which allow for simultaneity, multiplicity and hybridity' (Schaal 2016).

organic choreography would be a direct continuation of the past, a lineage of pure authenticity. On the other hand, a merely syncretic — that is, constructed — choreography would lay no claim to a real material source or substrate.[16] A language that is both organic and syncretic draws on multiple sources in order to produce something genuinely new. Neither collage nor continuation, it amounts to a substantive discovery of a new possibility or a new way forward — in a word: research.

On research choreography

Although choreographic objects mean differently in different times and places, this kind of contextually and socially constructed meaning does not — contra the linguistic turn — exhaust their meaning. As epistemic objects, they also push back against the social act of construction, revealing their own emergent contours, which cannot be denied any more than they can be strictly determined. So, choreography can be research. But then is all choreography 'research choreography'? Is there choreography that enacts pure training (repetition without iterative differentiation) or efficient performance (application of craft without movement into the unknown) and therefore is not research? Certainly.

André Lepecki writes of errancy as dramaturgical method:

> [T]he dramaturg must engage in an 'anexact yet rigorous' methodology, not aligned with knowledge and knowing, but with the work of errancy. Here errancy must be understood not as the search for errors, the privileging of mistakes, or the apology of failure as method … but in its strongest etymological sense, to err as to drift, to get lost, to go astray. (in Hansen and Callison 2015: 54)

I hope I have demonstrated that this anexact yet rigorous methodology has a name — research — and that it both embraces and far exceeds the quantified research of technological science. Choreography here has been understood as an ongoing negotiation with the materiality of embodiment. When this negotiation is directed towards the discovery of new, previously unknown pathways in practice, then choreography becomes research. Where it borders on theatre, on somatics, on digital media, on cultural identity, and on everyday life, choreography reaches into these territories in a way that is neither planned nor haphazard but *epistemic*.

The question then becomes where this takes place: not where in space, but where in knowledge? And not only at the individual level — what do you know? — but also at the institutional level: What knowledges does a given institution support? I find that Lepecki — no doubt in response to the still-powerful positivist legacies that accord science so much more legitimacy than dance — slightly overemphasizes the importance of the unknown in relation to the known. For errancy always begins somewhere and, when research is truly open-ended and aims for the 'blue skies' of the unknown, that beginning point is the only aspect of the work that can be at least partially controlled in advance. Choreography as research then has as much to do with where one locates oneself in the pathways of knowledge as with where one goes from there.

You are not alone in the tunnels and shafts of practice.

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[16] On the notion of substrate in this context, see Spatz (2015: 64-67).

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