

Ben Spatz reads Emma Cocker, Nikolaus Gansterer, Mariella Greil, *Choreo-graphic Figures: Deviations from the Line* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017).

I pick up *Choreo-Graphic Figures* with my own book, *Making a Laboratory*, in mind. As volumes, they could not be more different: mine, a pocket size critical introduction to a specific new research method; theirs, a hefty and gorgeous volume, exciting to hold, brimming with multivocal contributions and complex design choices that push the limits of what it means to read. Immediately my two main practices of reading are stymied: If I read the PDF version, I will miss many of the delicious design choices and fail to experience what seems to be the essential physicality of the object. But in reading the hardcopy, I must put aside my usual technique of annotation, because I cannot bear to write in this book. Already, then, I am facing some of the core questions of artistic research: What can I do with this book? What can this book do?

Choreo-Graphic Figures: Deviations from the Line is an experimental and collaboratively generated artist book that pushes the limits of the form and demands from the reader that they do more than read. A thick and charismatic volume, it incorporates pages of different colors and textures; photographs, drawings, sketches; theory, instructions, lists, charts; dialogues and testimonies; fold-outs, embossing, transparencies, and a detachable jacket. The design of the book object articulates as well as contains the book's palpable engagement with contemporary artistic research processes and the concept of the laboratory. Three 'key researchers' based in fine art, applied arts, and dance/choreography are joined by twenty-two 'wit(h)nesses' whose contributions range from theoretical essays to poems, reflections, and mixed media contributions. The book's content is nonlinear, containing many printed hyperlinks (→), but grounded in references to a series of 'method labs': 'laboratories for experiential knowledge production' (10) that permeate the book photographically as well as through its diagrams, instructions, conversations, and theorizations.

It was only when I peeled off the elaborate, separable dust jacket that I felt able to handle the book, to engage with it as it wants: as an experimental 'toolkit' or 'ecology' that may be 'practised or performed as much as read' (19). Freed of its jacket, undressed, the book lies flat on its thread-sewn binding and feels more available for use. Now I was holding its body, touching its skin. The jacket lay beside it, a complex object in its own right, unevenly cut, containing an index and a map. As I paged through the volume, another object popped out: a bookmark containing a score containing several practices, each containing several keywords. How and where to dive into these contents?

I have led with the form of the book because I believe this is a cutting edge of artistic research (cutting in multiple senses): the question of form. Crucial to this question is the problem of writing, which the authors address directly in their prologue (16) and which returns in Dieter Mersch's naming of the book's central dialectic or conflict between *choreo*, the embodied performance practices of theatre, dance, and song; and *graphein*, writing, "the notching by which signs are marked" (112). But the question of form is broader than that of writing and raises the philosophical

problem of inscription or signification itself: ‘how we might articulate the instability and mutability of our *figures* without “fixing” that which is inherently dynamic and contingent as a literal sign’ (15). I recognize this as one of the dominant ways in which the problem of form is tackled in contemporary artistic research, linking it to deconstruction and other lineages of critical theory. But I also question the desire to avoid fixity and to classify the content of artistic research as more unstable and mutable, more dynamic and contingent, than the rest of life. What does it mean when a printed book, designed with tremendous care, articulates a desire not to fix things? Clearly, this book works in a different way than most. It ‘fixes’ things differently. Why not stand by those differences, acknowledging their limits and naming their potentials, rather than trying to reach beyond fixing and signification itself?

The influence of Erin Manning’s work is evident throughout the volume. While other framings for artistic research are also present, such as the transdisciplinary exchange between art and science as suggested by Henk Borgdorff, it is Manning’s work on the minor, the micro, and the *more-than* that seems to gather together the book’s core questions, linking the multiplicity and shared temporality of the Method Lab events/sessions to the reworked form of the book. Out of this emphasis on that which cannot be fixed, that which specifically eludes or escapes archival capture, paradoxical questions arise:

- ‘[H]ow might we attend to and ‘make intelligible’ the event of *figuring*; furthermore, how might we do this without ‘flattening’ or fixing that which is contingent?’ (73)
- ‘[H]ow do we let go of set disciplinary ways of operating, relinquish what is familiar or known, safe or certain?’ (130)
- ‘[H]ow to attend to the micro level of sense-making within shared live exploration?’ (215)

For years I have struggled name the frustration I feel regarding the prominence and predominance of questions like these in artistic research — not because they are unfamiliar, I think, but because they constitute the commonplace procedure of research in every field, from chemical engineering to martial arts. But in every other field of research, as far as I know, such questions are posed with respect to disciplinary knowledge already sedimented. *Given the isolation of a certain protein*, how might we develop new micro levels of sense-making for its operations? *Given the established technique necessary to execute a certain martial form*, what more might be found to be possible at the edges of our shared practice? Only in a particular lineage of critical theory, linked to what I have called ‘the trope of excess,’ do we find such a reflexive thematization of research itself and of the precise, never capturable moment in which something new, something *more-than*, arrives.¹

This is not a secret. On the contrary, it is one of the main theoretical approaches to artistic research, recognizable in what Elizabeth Fisher and Rebecca Fortnum call a ‘largely negative lexicon’ of anti-techniques: to renounce, to yield or leave behind, to clear ground or empty out; the undoing of

discipline, deschooling or unlearning, coming undone (43). This approach can generate a million fascinating questions *how* (66–7), *when* (252–3), and *where* (312–3), which then often remain unanswered, at least in their specificity. It leads also to a rejection of topic, of *aboutness* itself: ‘Whilst “artistic research” can be applied as a “method” for exploring something *other-than*, we activate it in self-reflexive relation to itself’ (9). This is a bold challenge. Yet I never cease to worry about a mode of self-reflexivity that abstracts and reifies unknowing itself, unfixity itself, without locating and situating them within particular frameworks of prior knowledge. If the ‘Method Lab is the place where we [...] come together to give articulation to the meaning and weight of relations as generative forces within the making of aesthetic knowledge’ (226), then doesn’t it matter most of all what kind of relations we are dealing with, and which disciplinary histories define the ‘aesthetic’ in a particular context? And if ‘heterogeneity,’ ‘differentiation,’ and ‘working together *in difference*’ (228) are essential to this process, then don’t we need to know *within which fields* of sameness and identity that desired unknowingness unfolds?

In my understanding of laboratory research, there is both an opening and a closing cut, and the closing cut must flow into an iterative process, framing and reframing the lab, which allows it to acquire directionality over time. Where does the lab process *go*? If the closing cut is not integrated into a process of analysis that feeds back into lab design, then a lab may generate endless data without interpretation. I worry that this is what we are doing, much of the time, in artistic research. Here, in the first dialogue, Emma Cocker describes a delicate process whereby the lab moves toward a condition ‘where it is possible to intuit or be capable of dialogue without words’ (216). I recognize this process, but I want to know more about its other side, its essential counterpart, wherein the wordless events of the lab, the sought-after moments of *more-than*, are reincorporated into fields of discursive analysis – not in order to fix, capture, or control them, but to produce traces that can feed back into practice, including the practice of those who were not present in the lab. This is clearly the book’s intention and I find that it responds to this core problem of artistic research in a way that is simultaneously daring and mild: daring in relation to the form of the academic book, yet mild in relation to a wider field of problems.

Form is intrinsically related to content. What then is this research *about*? Can we accept the claim that the research is about itself? Can it be *about aboutness* (or *about non-aboutness*)? Can a research project be designed to contest the assumption that research projects must be about things? Perhaps, but I find this approach unsatisfying and, less in this volume than in some of Manning’s longer theoretical writings, to a degree even disingenuous. Clearly, the research is situated somewhere. Materials enter the space, including bodies, and that space is already defined and located by its own geographies, infrastructures, and material histories. I think it would not be wrong to frame this research, and most artistic research conducted in Europe, including my own, as research conducted on and about the institution of the university.² Yet, following Borgdorff’s positioning of artistic research between the university and ‘the art world,’ perhaps the university is

not the most precise way to name the relevant topic.³ I would like to propose a different framework, which both resonates with and breaks away from a set of linked terms that form a central rhizome in *Choreo-Graphing Figures: from how-ness into when-ness and where-ness*, orbiting in turn around *wit(h)ness*, a playful combination of *witness* and *withness*. In my view, this research, and again most artistic research conducted in Europe, including my own, must also be understood as research on and around, even if in some way also against, *whiteness*.

This claim is meant to be deflationary, but not dismissive. If I have begun to analyze much artistic research as a mode of *critical whiteness studies by other means*, that is not in order to attack it, but on the contrary to try to redeem it within a broader decolonial frame.⁴ For that reason, I am not interested in calling out this or any similar project, again including my own, on account of its whiteness. The whiteness of the research space and of the researchers themselves is evident in every photomontage, as they are also in the audiovisual documents of my own artistic research projects. Evidently the funding streams, the institutional bases, and the aesthetics of the laboratory are white in a variety of ways; and whiteness lives also in the absence of explicit engagement with racial and colonial difference. (Small exceptions are found in the contributions by P. A. Skantze, Helmut Ploebst, and Karin Harrasser.) Pushing this idea further, I believe that the whiteness of many artistic research labs can also be located in the absence of children, disability, and gender diversity. But to say all this is to state the obvious, because this is what artistic research has in common with nearly every other field of academic research in Europe.⁵ In reframing (white) artistic research as a mode of critical whiteness studies, I intend to acknowledge its complicity with the rest of European academia and institutionality, but I also want to consider what might be its valuable difference.

I fear that the 'negative lexicon' of the trope of excess, with its anxious emphasis on capturing that which cannot be captured, functions here and in other contexts as a way to avoid situating the research in its material contexts. If instead I approach this volume as a work of critical whiteness studies, I find that its practices and methods acquire more resonance; its questions of *how-ness* and *when-ness* and *where-ness* come into focus. Who is it, after all, that needs to work on *relation*, on *difference*, on the *micro* and *infra* of 'shared live exploration,' in the protected space of a closed laboratory? Who is it that needs to relearn walking, breathing, voicing, sleeping, touching, and shaking (136–41) as embodied practices? These are not the dominant practices of white society, but neither are they radically other to it. They are not intensively disruptive or transgressive but, as I wrote above, mildly other, gently transgressive. As I attempt to think about the promise of artistic research from the perspective of black and brown and indigenous and queer and trans critique and practice, it seems to me that European artistic research must name its own grappling with whiteness and must look for ways to make this explicit rather than implicit in the forms it generates.⁶ Perhaps in this way, our field might learn to wield its negative lexicon toward a specific and much-needed rather than a general unmaking: to renounce, to yield or leave behind (whiteness); to clear ground or

empty out (colonial ways of knowing); the undoing of (white) discipline; deschooling or unlearning (whiteness); (whiteness) coming undone.

¹ Ben Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015): 56–60.

² In this text, I follow an experimental orthography, according to which regional as well as identity terms are lowercased. On artistic research as research on the form of the institution, see also Esa Kirkkopelto, 'Artistic Research as Institutional Practice,' in *Yearbook on Artistic Research* (Swedish Research Council, 2015), 41–53.

³ Henk Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia* (Leiden University Press, 2012).

⁴ On critical whiteness studies, see Sara Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness,' *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–68; Linda Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015); Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); George Yancy, *Look, a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012). This claim will be further developed in my forthcoming writings.

⁵ One obvious exception would be Black Studies; see Kehinde Andrews, 'The Radical "Possibilities" of Black Studies,' *The Black Scholar* 50, no. 3 (2020): 17–28. No doubt there are plenty of others, which however cannot unmake a much broader predominant whiteness.

⁶ Ben Spatz, 'Artistic Research and the Queer Prophetic,' *Text and Performance Quarterly* (2021): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2021.1908585>.