

Embodied Knowledge in Theatre and Dance research group

New research group

The Embodied Knowledge in Theatre and Dance (BKTD) research group is being set up this year (2019) as part of the DAS Research, the research program of DAS Graduate School at the Academy of Theatre and Dance (ATD), Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK). The research group offers teachers and students a space for encounter and research on this area of interest, and contributes to the debate surrounding the pressing issue of the preservation of Dutch performing arts heritage. It is crucial that greater attention is given to the documentation and archival of historical and contemporary performative practices, and that spaces are created for *reflection on the embodied knowledge that underlie these practices*. These activities are the primary focus of the new cross-disciplinary research group.

One of the cornerstones of the BKTD research group is a conviction that theatre and dance education stand to benefit from the development of supplementary *alternative narratives*. By prioritising the embodied, practice-based knowledge that characterises the transitory arts of theatre and dance the BKTD research group strives to contribute to the renewal, diversification and enrichment of existing theatre-historical and dance-historical narratives.

The coordinator is [Marijn de Langen](#), PhD, who has been a researcher and theory teacher at the ATD's Mime Bachelor's degree study programme since 2002. For quite some time now, she has focused on studying modes of thought in theatre practice, with a particular focus on Dutch mime practice. Her method has included inviting performers and practitioners to reflect on their practice-based knowledge in a variety of ways. In 2017, De Langen successfully defended her PhD thesis *Dutch Mime: a distinct mode of thought in theatre practice (Mime denken: Nederlandse mime als manier van denken in en door de theaterpraktijk*, Utrecht University). In her postdoctoral research project *The Past Bubbles Around Us: Mime Archives in the Public Domain* (2019-2021), De Langen brings together theatre heritage and embodied knowledge by posing the question of how it might be possible to open up the Dutch mime archives, prioritising a focus on the embodied knowledge they hold.

Embodied knowledge

Embodied knowledge is knowledge that is inherent to the body. Like practitioners of other specialist occupations, performing artists have a command of *specialist* embodied knowledge, by training and using their body in a variety of performance practices. Actors, mime and other performers, dancers, puppeteers, opera singers and all manner of other performing arts practitioners are used to, and trained to work using the body – which includes, of course, the brain. It is certainly not the intention here to impose an outdated Cartesian distinction between the rational and the physical; thinking and doing are synchronous.

The ATD is bursting at the seams with embodied knowledge – knowledge of ‘what a body can do’ (Spatz 2015) – about subjects such as the use of muscle tension, about flow, breath, rhythm, ‘pulling the bones away from each other’, being present in the here and now, transparency, using the body to make space visible, working on-site, visual composition, the list goes on. These forms of embodied knowledge are specific to the performing arts. In many cases they have remained unarticulated – and in some cases they are difficult to articulate. How should one go about explaining what *dynamorhythm* is, for example, or what ‘being in the moment’ means? Yes there are challenges, but physical knowledge such as this is fundamental to the performer's craft, and explicating it is important for a number of reasons, including exchange

between the generations, and between traditions and cultures. In addition, research into existing embodied knowledge can drive innovation and generate new knowledge.

Embodied knowledge and theory

This research group draws inspiration from theory-based knowledge from publications and projects focusing on embodied knowledge. *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research* (Routledge 2015) by performance scholar and art practitioner Ben Spatz is an exemplary recent endeavour that seeks to centralise the embodied knowledge of performers (ranging from actors to dancers, puppeteers, martial artists, and yoga practitioners) within theatre theory. Spatz makes the case for interpreting technique as ‘epistemic activity, an activity that engages with, or produces knowledge’, and for initiating research projects on the theme of ‘transmission of embodied technique through time and space’. Spatz heads the Embodied Research Working Groupⁱ at the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), which carries out research into ensuring that the practice-based knowledge possessed by performers from various traditions and cultural backgrounds becomes shareable and transferable.

The Secret Art of the Performer: A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology (1991) by Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, is an early example of a work that describes specific embodied knowledge and makes it shareable. The body of published work by performance scholar and practitioner Philip Zarilli (1998/2002/2008) is also an excellent example of research into the practice-based embodied knowledge of performative practice, with the author creating an abundance of practice-based theory through the study of subjects such as breath and energy as they relate to a variety of acting training methods.ⁱⁱ We can position Zarilli’s work as part of growing interdisciplinary interest in ‘embodied practice’, which Schatzki et al (2001) identify as the ‘practice turn’ in contemporary theory. Other projects and publications that seek to develop the shareability of practice-based knowledge include *Inside Movement Knowledge* by Emio Greco|PC (developed in part at the ATD)ⁱⁱⁱ and *A Choreographer’s Score*, a series of publications by Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker and Bojana Cvejic.^{iv} Peter den Dekker’s *The Dynamics of Standing Still: The Ancient Art of Recharging Your Batteries* (2010) details the practice-based knowledge of Qigong (practised as part of several theatre study programmes at the ATD), and Richard Sennett’s *The Craftsman* (2008) has also been an important source of inspiration. See also [this](#) article by Marijn de Langen.

Questions

Questions with a potential role to play in this research group:

*Knowledge inventory: What forms of embodied knowledge and techniques are used at the ATD?

*The archive: What is the historical context of each technique and form of training? Is it rooted in ancient physical knowledge (e.g. Qigong) or in an ongoing or relatively recent discourse (e.g. Gaga)? Where and in what ways is this historical knowledge documented and archived?

*Transfer: In what ways can physical knowledge be transferred (to new generations)?

*Research: In what ways can practice-based educational organisations conduct research that leads to *new knowledge*, while also fulfilling its role in transferring knowledge?

*Inclusivity and diversity: In what ways is the ATD engaging with the cultural specificity of physical training methods? Do the methods used at the school exclude specific ideas or – literally – specific bodies?

Embodied Knowledge working group for ATD teachers (BA)

On 2 October 2019, the inaugural informative meeting will take place for ATD teachers with a physical teaching practice who are interested in joining a working group focusing on this subject and have ideas for their own possible research in this area. In the 2019-2020 academic year, the working group will meet on six Wednesday afternoons, from 14.00-17.00, and will involve theory and physical practice in the studio. If you wish to be part of the group, click [here](#) to go to the invitation. Depending on the final make-up of the group, sessions will be conducted either in English or Dutch. A maximum of 10 teachers can take part, and group membership should ideally represent a broad spectrum of ATD study programmes. Once the composition of the working group has been finalised, DAS Research will remunerate teachers for participation. If you are interested in joining the group, please send an email to marijn.delangen@ahk.nl

What a Body Can Do, a research seminar for BA students at the ATD

Students from all the ATD's Bachelor's degree study programmes also have the opportunity to play an active part in this research. In the 2019-2020 academic year Marijn de Langen will organise an English-language research seminar that is open to a multidisciplinary group of ATD students who represent the broadest possible range of study programmes and share a specific interest in embodied knowledge. The maximum number of participants is 15. The seminar comprises one introductory session and six further sessions on Mondays from 19.00 to 21.30. If you are interested in participating in the seminar, please send an email to: marijn.delangen@ahk.nl.

Decroux Café

The first Decroux Café event held in January 2019 is to be followed up with further events on 12, 13 and 14 February 2020, when another series of live interviews with former students of Etienne Decroux will explore how today's mime performers relate to a historical training method, namely Decroux's *mime corporel*. These gatherings focusing on embodied knowledge, transgenerational transfer and oral history are open to all ATD students and teachers and anyone else with an interest in these subjects.





Decroux Café 2019. Photographs by Anastasiia Liubchenko.

ⁱ See <https://www.iftr.org/working-groups/embodied-research>

ⁱⁱ Philip Zarilli, *When the Body Becomes all Eyes*, Oxford University Press 1998; *Acting Reconsidered*, Routledge 2002; *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach After Stanislavski*, Routledge 2008

ⁱⁱⁱ See www.insidemovementknowledge.net

^{iv} See www.rosas.be