



*Performing Embodiment: Choreographies of Affect, Language, and Social Norms*, ed. by Alberica Bazzoni and Federica Buongiorno, *Cultural Inquiry*, 39 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2026), pp. 1–11

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## Introduction

### Performing Embodiment

CITE AS:

Alberica Bazzoni and Federica Buongiorno, 'Introduction: Performing Embodiment', in *Performing Embodiment: Choreographies of Affect, Language, and Social Norms*, ed. by Alberica Bazzoni and Federica Buongiorno, *Cultural Inquiry*, 39 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2026), pp. 1–11 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-39\\_01](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-39_01)>

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**ABSTRACT:** This introduction rethinks embodiment as a performative and relational process that challenges the legacy of mind-body dualism. Drawing on phenomenology, the authors present the lived body as a body-subject whose perception and knowledge emerge through situated, kinaesthetic engagement with the world. Embodiment is thus understood not as a static condition but as an ongoing choreography of affect, language, and social interaction. The introduction then presents the three interconnected domains explored in the volume: language as an embodied and world-making practice; dance and somatic choreography as paradigms of affective and temporal becoming; and socio-political norms (particularly gender and academic structures) as disciplinary performances inscribed on and enacted by bodies. Together, the essays advance an interdisciplinary framework in which embodiment appears as a dynamic process of co-constitution between bodies, world, and social power.

**KEYWORDS:** embodiment; performing; mind-body dualism; phenomenology; social norms; affect; language

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# Introduction

## Performing Embodiment

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The paradigm of embodiment — which is today a broad concept around which various theoretical approaches revolve, from phenomenology<sup>1</sup> to embodied cognition,<sup>2</sup> and from cognitive sciences<sup>3</sup> to ethology<sup>4</sup> and artificial intelligence<sup>5</sup> — should be primarily understood as a strong

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- 1 Beside Merleau-Ponty's works, see Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* [1931], trans. by Dorion Cairns (Springer, 2012); and Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* [1975], trans. by Albert Hofstadter (Indiana University Press, 1988).
  - 2 See Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* [1987], trans. by Robert Paolucci (Shambhala, 1998).
  - 3 See Francisco Varela, Eleanor Rosch, and Evan Thompson, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (MIT Press, 1992).
  - 4 See Helen L. Ma and others, 'Embodying Cognitive Ethology', *Theory & Psychology*, 33.1 (2023), pp. 42–58 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/09593543221126165>>.
  - 5 See *Embodied Artificial Intelligence*, ed. by Fumiya Iida and others (Springer, 2004).

response to the mind–body problem. Beginning from the Cartesian legacy, this dualism has strongly influenced modern and contemporary theories of subjectivity and knowledge, both on a theoretical and practical-political level.<sup>6</sup> At the heart of Western metaphysics lies the idea — much older than Cartesian dualism — of a distinction (both ontological and epistemological) between corporeality — that is, extension (space, matter) — and spirituality — that is, thought (unextended and immaterial). Modern philosophy has been marked by the problem of dualism: “This idea that the mind was separate from the body was later dominant in the Christian metaphysical tradition in the form of a “soul”, and the conception ‘of a mind–body split persisted into the 18th century through the works of Locke, Hume and Kant’.<sup>7</sup>

Against substantial dualism, the materialistic tradition — beginning in antiquity with Democritus — has rejected the conception of the soul as immaterial and separate from physical reality, and has argued for its reduction to the actual (material) components of reality. However, while this is an argument against dualism as the real *distinction* of the substances, it does not address the question of the *connection* of mind and body, as it is already presented by Descartes. In a letter to Princess Elizabeth (dated 28 June 1643), Descartes claims that as long as one *does not do phil-*

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6 For a reconstruction of the mind–body problem with particular reference to phenomenological theory, see Federica Buongiorno, ‘Embodiment, Disembodiment, and Re-embodiment in the Construction of the Digital Self’, *Humana.Mente*, 12.36 (2019), pp. 310–30 <<https://www.humanamente.eu/index.php/HM/article/view/290>> [accessed 10 November 2025].

7 William Farr, Sara Price, and Carey Jewitt, ‘An Introduction to Embodiment and Digital Technology Research: Interdisciplinary Themes and Perspectives’, *National Centre for Research Methods Working Paper* (2012) <<https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/2257/>> [accessed 10 November 2025].

*osophy* and relies ‘on life and ordinary conversations,’ one learns ‘how to conceive the union of mind and body’. If one focuses on the union, rather than the distinction of body and mind, one can claim that the body and the soul are united as matter is to form. But what about the relation of mind and body? Is it of a mental nature, or is it itself material? Materialism avoids this question, which instead is fully addressed — in contemporary debates — by phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenology reacted to dualism by developing two specific and correlated notions: that of *reduction* (on the methodological level) and that of *embodiment* (on the ontological level). Husserl’s conception of *Leib* — or the living body as more than just a physical body (*Körper*) — is already meant to overcome substantial dualism: what makes a body a living body is the fact that it inhabits and experiences itself (and others) within a certain environment, and this experience is inseparable from the kinaesthetic processes performed by the body. Intentionality itself expresses the original correlation of mind (subject) and body (materiality): the starting point is precisely the *relation* of body and mind, and not their split. They constitute each other mutually from the very beginning. At the same time, the ontological primacy of relation can be sustained only by resorting to reduction as a method. Descartes claims that the union (relation) of mind and body could be conceived by subjects only by *refraining from doing philosophy*, that is, by *simply living* — this is the meaning of the well-known Cartesian motto: *primum vivere, deinde philosophari*. Reflection splits what life keeps united. Phenomenological reduction is a way to reconcile life and reflection: it is both a *gesture*, a bodily exercise — an effort to stop and focus not on the supposedly objective way things *are*, but on the way they *manifest* themselves and are subjectively apprehended —

and a reflection, an abstraction from common-sense reality. It is an embodied view — a *point of view*, and not from nowhere, but from the specific, embodied, and situated experience that is lived. Reduction is *performing embodiment* — this is why phenomenology represents the main theoretical and methodological reference for the reflections gathered in this volume.

Combining the notions of *performativity* and *embodiment*, this volume situates the body in the realm of processes, movement, and *poiesis*. The notion of performativity addresses questions of ontology, epistemology, aesthetics, and politics, generating alternative configurations to the mind–body dualism while avoiding forms of essentialist and deterministic foundationalism. The contributions to this volume emphasize *doing* over *being*: the body *does* and *is done*; it is engaged in a movement of co-constitution with the world. It is an emplaced and kinaesthetic unit, which expresses itself within, and is shaped by, the constantly changing encounter with its physical and social environment. It is in *doing* that bodies produce knowledge and shared (or contested) social meaning. Embodiment is *performed*, in the sense that it is a process that manifests itself in the forms of its making, a process which is both passive and active, inscription of the world in the body and action of the body in and on the world.

It is Maurice Merleau-Ponty who best understood this sense of *performing embodiment* beyond substantial dualism:

If I find, while reflecting upon the essence of the body, that it is tied to the essence of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is identical with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because, ultimately, the subject that I am, understood concretely, is inseparable

from this particular body and from this particular world.<sup>8</sup>

In his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty highlights the a priori coincidence of consciousness and the body, and argues that mind and body are not reducible to their parts, nor is the body simply to be conceived as either object or subject, since from the very beginning it is already a body-subject. As Russell Keat notes, ‘Merleau-Ponty implicitly challenges all philosophical positions which accept some basic dichotomy between subject and object [...]. In particular, he rejects Cartesian dualism’,<sup>9</sup> especially the ontological principle of the real distinction of the substances. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, the human body is itself a ‘subject’, and the human subject is necessarily, not just contingently, embodied. Against the Cartesian assumption, he argues:

The motor experience of our body is not a particular case of knowledge; rather, it offers us a manner of reaching the world and the object, a ‘praktognosia’, that must be recognized as original, and perhaps as originary.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, as Keat writes:

[T]he body’s *praktognosia*, i.e. practical knowledge, cannot be analytically decomposed into more primitive concepts, such as ‘body’ and ‘mind’; [...] this praktognostic body in

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- 8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], trans. by Donald A. Landes (Routledge, 2012), p. 431.
- 9 Russell Keat, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of the Body’, unpublished paper delivered at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University (May 1982) <<https://www.russellkeat.net/admin/papers/S1.pdf>> [accessed 10 November 2025].
- 10 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 141.

some sense forms the basis for all other kinds of relationship between the human subject and the world.<sup>11</sup>

Not only is consciousness embodied; for Merleau-Ponty, the unconscious itself is nothing other than ‘a certain posture of my social body.’<sup>12</sup> Conversely, ‘to have a body is also to have a past of embodiment; there is a time of the body, a temporal structure of embodiment.’<sup>13</sup>

Merleau-Ponty speaks of a ‘pressure of transformation’,<sup>14</sup> whose centre is the body: to pressure is at the same time to be pressed, since perception always involves a chiasmatic relation that is active and passive at the same time. This evokes Merleau-Ponty’s concept of *flesh* as the *tissue* or texture connecting bodily parts, and as the founding bodily ability to experience the world — a notion that is at the core of Susan Kozel’s chapter in this volume, as well as her conversation with choreographer and dancer Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir. Tissue is both active and passive: it fills the gaps and forms parts, and at the same time accommodates systems. Tissue is intelligent before being conscious: it is another way to reconcile life and reflection in a phenomenological perspective. Merleau-Ponty’s thought implies embodiment as the temporal texture of being, whereby the subject is crossed and ‘lived’ by the unconscious, the passivity, and the vulnerability of *having a body* and *being alive*.

In their contributions, Lucilla Guidi, Alberica Bazzoni, and Ursula Fanning focus on language performativity as

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11 Keat, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of the Body’.

12 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954–1955)*, trans. by Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey (Northwestern University Press, 2010), p. 193.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 201.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

providing the most effective objection to mind–body dualism. They investigate philosophical and literary language by foregrounding performativity — what language does, and how it does it — over its semantic function — that is, what it refers to. In these essays, performativity describes the embodied, relational, and situated feature of language, as opposed to a structuralist (and, later, deconstructionist) paradigm which focuses primarily, if not exclusively, on the absence of the signified and the web of relationships among signifiers. Much more than being just a *sign* that points to an external, independent *referent*, here language is understood as an embodied *gesture* that enacts — that is, performs — a certain configuration of reality. Drawing on Wittgenstein and Cavell, Guidi's chapter examines our mutual attunement in a shared and embodied practice of language; it further explores mutual attunement through Judith Butler's notion of opacity as a relational and affective ontology. Literary texts explored by Bazzoni and Fanning draw attention to writing as a physical act, carried out by an embodied and situated subject, which summons the reader into a shared temporality, further anchoring language to the body. Significantly, such an attention to the link between writing and embodiment is often central in texts written by women, who were historically excluded from self-representation. Within a patriarchal order, as Butler argues, 'the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom.'<sup>15</sup> In the course of the twentieth century, women writers appropriate and deeply transform the function of literature, as they seek to 'dismantle the Cartesian

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15 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990), p. 17.

and phallogocentric separation of mind and body and push the woman's body, as part of her being, into the speaking subject.<sup>16</sup>

The volume then moves away from language into a second area of inquiry: dance. In framing the ways in which embodiment is performed, the concept of choreography emerges as a particularly generative one. In her essay, Susan Kozel focuses on affective choreographies through a phenomenological framework, whereby attention to affective states can be articulated. As patterns of movement, choreographies suitably foreground processes and transformations that take place in time while retaining intelligible shapes. Furthermore, as patterns of movement that are defined by affective inter-actions within and among bodies, choreographies are powerful ways to capture the embodied dynamics of passivity and activity, design and improvisation, inner and outer states, and reciprocity of action and re-action. Such dynamics are central to Margrét Guðjónsdóttir's work on somatic practices, which she has also developed in her long-term collaboration with Kozel. As the conversation included here between Kozel and Guðjónsdóttir illustrates, their collaboration exemplifies a phenomenological methodology, which constantly circles theory back to praxis. This rooting of philosophical reflection into embodied and performative praxis was reflected in the structuring of the international symposium 'Performing Embodiment: Practices of Reduction', which took place at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry in February 2022 and from which this volume originates. On that occasion, standard academic presentations and

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16 Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative 1980–2000*, Italian Perspectives, 9 (Legenda, 2002), p. 85.

panel discussions were accompanied by the premiere of Guðjónsdóttir's installation *CATALYSTS — Somatic Resonance*, which explores intensive somatic states in dance through the lens of augmented reality, and by a somatic practice workshop run by Guðjónsdóttir herself with the symposium's participants.

The notion of choreography as effectively capturing the dynamic between design and improvisation and the mutual affective influence among bodies is also relevant in Dorothea Olkowski's essay on Argentine tango. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt and Jean-Paul Sartre, Olkowski shows how embodied existence always implies *appearing* in front of an Other and into a world that is the site of that appearance. In tango, the dancing partners' embodied experience *appears*, as their self-display, relationality, mutual affect, and recognition are performatively heightened. A similar form of performative appearance also takes place in the literary writings analysed by Fanning, as the authors come into existence as authors precisely through the act of writing and their concomitant exposition to the (desired) reader.

Alongside language and dance, a third area where the coupling of performativity and embodiment offers original insights is socio-political analysis. Again, the notion of choreography is relevant here, as it fittingly describes the processes through which social norms categorize, orient, and discipline bodies, and the ways in which such norms are implemented — or may be challenged — in practice. Gender is possibly the most disputed ground in this respect, with Butler's *Gender Trouble* providing a fundamental contribution to the very notion of performativity. Biology, representation, norms, violence: gender is constantly produced and reproduced through the inscription of gestures, the selection of physical descriptors, and the

attribution of social roles, which form complex disciplinary choreographies that function as *dispositives*, in a Foucauldian sense. Elisa Virgili's essay begins from these premises, analysing gender performance and women's bodies in combat sports. Virgili opens up the investigation of a field of experience where performativity and embodiment may come into conflict, ultimately pointing back to dominant social norms and calling them into question.<sup>17</sup> As repeated and incorporated patterns of behaviour, disciplinary choreographies organize social space, dictating dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that work on and through bodies. While these dynamics and the lines they trace may be more evident in contexts where bodies are explicitly concerned — such as dance or, indeed, combat sports — they are no less stringent when a certain context is (allegedly) primarily concerned with 'the mind'. In her essay, Chiara Montalti draws on feminist and disability studies to investigate the role of embodiment and performativity in the academic field, exposing its obliviousness to the weight and needs of actual bodies engaged in academic work. Based on old-fashioned assumptions of neutrality and universal-

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17 The subject of women and trans people in combat sports recently came to worldwide attention due to the transphobic, racist, and sexist remarks made by several public figures, including Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni, US president Donald Trump, British novelist JK Rowling, and multibillionaire Elon Musk (among other right-wing public figures), concerning Algerian female boxer Imane Khelif's participation at the 2024 Olympics. Accusing Khelif of being a 'man' who was unfairly competing against women, these figures prompted surreal and violent speculation regarding Khelif's gender identity, and general confusion as to whether this ought to be determined by her birth certificate (which registers her as female) or by her hormone levels, leading to waves of degrading comments. Khelif went on to win the gold medal and sued her detractors. See 'Algeria's Imane Khelif Files Harassment Case After Gender Row', Al Jazeera, 11 August 2024 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/11/algerias-imane-khelif-files-harassment-case-after-gender>> [10 November 2025].

ity, accustomed to abstracting the intellect from the flesh, the academic field is in fact organized around very specific bodies, while through its choreographed performances it works as an exclusionary field. The Cartesian mind–body split is incorporated into a social field that tightly selects which bodies belong in it, and which do not. The lines of inclusion and exclusion, however, are not spelled out, as this would imply acknowledging that bodies matter; rather, they are performed. To foreground embodiment and performativity, thus, is also to challenge the mind–body split in the academic field: *in theory* and *in practice*.

Alberica Bazzoni and Federica Buongiorno, 'Introduction: Performing Embodiment', in *Performing Embodiment: Choreographies of Affect, Language, and Social Norms*, ed. by Alberica Bazzoni and Federica Buongiorno, Cultural Inquiry, 39 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2026), pp. 1–11 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-39\\_01](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-39_01)>

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