Phenomenology is central to this book, but the following pages do not present a typical transcendental or even existential phenomenology. What is offered is a contemporary adaptation of the later thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, filtered and expanded through the voices of others including Emmanuel Levinas and Gilles Deleuze. This embodied approach to the construction of meaning and is sufficient flexible to deal with unexpected or unprecedented experiences, but it is more than a methodology. A phenomenological approach manifests itself as a way of living in the world that integrates intellect with sensory experience and does not flinch from that which seems to be paradoxical or ambiguous; it can be used to construct meaning, to celebrate the mundane as well as the extraordinary, or to critique thought, attitudes, or social structures. I have found Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological writings particularly useful for making connections across disciplines, practices, or concepts. The fundamental embeddedness of this phenomenological approach means that it can be gen-

1. PERFORMING PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology. The central nervous system’s brave gamble that it exists.
--J.G. Ballard, Project for a Glossary of the Twentieth Century

In other words, as soon as an art has become autonomous, it makes a fresh start. It is therefore salient to consider this start as a sort of phenomenology. On principle, phenomenology liquidates the past and confronts what is new.
--Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space
of this phenomenological approach means that it can be generous and poetic at the same time as rigorously anchoring concepts in concrete reality. Many of the technological systems described in this book were entirely new to me, including motion capture, telematics, and wearable computers. I had no frame of reference for them, neither conceptual nor physical, there were no pre-set modes or patterns I could assume, and apart from a desire to retain the body as the basis of knowledge and experience I had no investment in the outcome of my investigations. What I had was a love of movement and a philosophical approach to the world that permitted me to listen to my body, to sense the world, and to ask questions and derive, if not exactly answers, at least connections and ground for further questioning. This long first chapter provides the basis for the rest of the book. It can be read on its own or used to better understand the four chapters to follow. Almost like a camera’s lens, or the acts of exhaling and inhaling, the chapter sections shift from wide to narrow focus and back again, external and internal to the material of the book. The first four sections (Science Friction, An Unavoidable Necessity, The Pre-reflective, and Resonance) provide a general intellectual and political context for a phenomenological approach to technologies and performance. This is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of the philosophical tradition of phenomenology; there are excellent books that do this already. The next five sections (Connective Tissue, Flesh, Reversibility/Chiasm, The Invisible, and Disequilibrium) narrow the focus to some of the more dense and complex concepts from Merleau-Ponty’s late writings. The Visible and the Invisible (1968) is an unfinished and perplexing book: for clarity, I provide interpretations of key concepts appearing later in this book. Broadening the scope once more, the next three sections (The Method, Heterophenomenology, and Sexual Difference) raise some practical, methodological issues. Finally, the last sections of this chapter (Performance, Techne/Technologies, and Saturated by the Virtual) offer a topography of the significant components of this book set forth in its subtitle: performance, technologies, and phenomenology. Each word points to theoretical and practical domains in which reside, not always harmoniously, a complex array of positions. Most of chapter 1 is devoted to explaining an approach to phenomenology, to illuminating the methodology that breathes life into these pages, but performance and technologies are equally important and entwined throughout. The final three sections outline an approach to performance, technologies, and the increasingly important designation of the virtual. How these play out in the rest of the book is specific to their context.
Phenomenology is a philosophical and existential approach to life, the body, politics, and meaning with roots in European thinking of the twentieth century. Like many conceptual movements emerging from volatile intellectual and political times, it inspired or irked in equal measure, provoking two or more generations of thinkers, artists, and students. Then it was dropped, or entered a period of latency. From the 1980s into the 1990s it became unfashionable to study phenomenology, almost politically suspect in the era of textual deconstruction and psychoanalysis, the time of the fragmentation of the body, identity, and the subject. The state of being in or out of fashion reflects a serious zeitgeist; it is more than a vacuous and superficial consumer-led following of transient styles by brittle people. Fashions in thought and design reflect anxieties as well as pleasures, blooming and extinguishing against an “unstable backdrop of rapid social, economic and technological change” (Evans 2003, 4); they indicate a need for intellectual and cultural nourishment. Saying that philosophies are subject to fashion is to respect their role in the fabric of culture and society rather than to place them on an academic shelf, once removed from the pulse of life. Nor is the term consumer innately trivial or base: we consume our worlds through our perception and motility, we integrate our surroundings into our bodies, we swallow, digest, and live from our milieu, and if it no longer nourishes us we crave something else. Fashion is about transformation, about overcoming exhaustion and revivification; we insert ourselves into a philosophy and it transforms us from the inside out. Phenomenology appeared exhausted in the 1990s, seeming to offer less rigor, insight, and inspiration than other philosophical lenses for examining the world. The critique of it as fundamentally a male, subject-centered approach to transcendent meaning overshadowed the validity of its basic tenets for a while—for a short while. Still, the core of phenomenology survived: that it calls for a return, again and again, to lived experience; that it takes as its starting point a position prior to, or beyond, the subject-object divide; that it shapes a reflective process that opens itself onto the richness of pre-reflective experience; that it is inclusive of a variety of experiences and not bound to a narrow and abstracted notion of truth; that it provides scope for the many dimensions of what we are as human beings to contribute to the expansion of knowledge and creation of cultural artifacts. Bodies, thought, imagination, memories, material conditions of life, and affect find a voice through phenomenology.

The revitalization of phenomenology is the result of a convergence of theoretical, cultural, and artistic forces and produces a new embodiment of older ideas. I have witnessed a need in dancers, artists, writers, cultural critics, and feminists to be able to describe concrete, lived human life, without forcing it through a methodological framework, or reducing it to a series of inner psychic experiences or conceptual abstractions (Moran 2000, 328). I have encountered also numerous students struggling with how to integrate their own experiences in their academic work. The writings of the twentieth-century phenomenologists, in particular, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, re-
main the “phenomenological canon” to which people turn but, swallowed and digested, their words become imbued with meaning and relevance to our times and cultural metamorphoses. This amounts to a cyclical corporealizing of the thought of our predecessors, and is compelling for seeming to pull in two directions at once: both respecting and disrespecting the tradition. The tradition is respected because the ideas are deemed meaningful or relevant to our embodied experience rather than simply out of blind adherence to their place in the canon, but creative disrespect is demonstrated as the ideas are interpreted, adapted, expanded, and elaborated. This interrogation of lived experience coinciding with an interrogation of the phenomenological texts themselves is, to use Merleau-Ponty’s phrase, an “inspired exegesis,” and, like inhalation and exhalation, new readings breath life into the words (1968, 13).

Contributing to the revitalization of phenomenology is the realization that the existing paradigms for research and the construction of meaning need to be expanded. The urge to move beyond existing categories of thought, and codes and conventions of understanding, begins with an unease that is as physical as it is intellectual, like an itch or shoes that no longer fit, crushing our toes and hampering us on a journey. The experiences described in this book are new or at the very least remixed, and they require new, as well as old, ways of understanding. These experiences are of a different register partly because they are increasingly facilitated by ever-expanding computational technologies, but also because human beings seem to be demanding a different range of physical experiences. Witness the expansion of people practicing yoga, martial arts, extreme sports, the extreme (or extremely banal) emotional narratives of reality TV, the upsurge in adventure travel, the continued alteration of our moods and physical well being with diet, alcohol, and drugs, both legal and illegal, and the transformation of bodies through fashion, piercing, tattooing, and reconstructive surgery. All of these indicate either that our current mental and physical states are intolerable and we are desperate to converge them with some sort of norm (the ideal nose, or Orlan’s more sinister take on the norms of beauty), or we are searching for, even craving, something new. These may be the indulgences of an affluent Western middle class, but the basis is the desire for an expansion of perception, of consciousness, and of bodily experience, and a sense that what currently exists needs to be transformed. What needs to go along with

are narrow constructions of gender (some worrying references to women), art (a seeming limitation to painting), and technology (as uniformly hostile to bodies). In my view, phenomenology can never be adopted as a doctrine because it is experiential and not prescriptive, but paradoxically, by not being doctrinaire about phenomenology it is possible to become ever more vibrant phenomenologists.¹

Taking inspiration from the original phenomenologists inevitably requires overlooking certain limitations as being products of different times; in the case of this book the most problematic
these changing experiences are new ways of understanding or interpreting them. Mark Taylor captured this succinctly when he identified a “need to develop new ways of understanding the world and of interpreting our experience” growing out of living at a time “of extraordinary complexity when systems and structures that have long organized life are changing at an unprecedented rate” (2001).

When our existing conceptual paradigms no longer do justice to our range of experiences there is the choice to abandon entirely the process of reflection, just to be, without the need to understand and reflect, or to attempt to find other paths of reflection. I share the belief with so many philosophers and psychologists that we are fundamentally reflective creatures, and that it is, on some level, impossible for us not to reflect. If this is the case, then we may as well do so intelligently and with some panache. The shifting existential, political, and social paradigms we are experiencing require new modalities of reflection, which need to occur, in effect, out on a limb, reaching beyond our existing methods and approaches while maintaining relevance to our lives.

The products of such reflection, which I will define and explain through the process of hyper-reflection after Merleau-Ponty, can span a range of output from scientific experiments to product design, musical composition, and choreography, but the most common and enduring communicative modality of phenomenological reflection is writing. This book is a piece of writing, writing through phenomenology and writing about phenomenology. Writing from the new is writing from the void, and amounts to a writing from our own bodies, from the moment to moment of our own existence. Margaret Atwood, in a simple phrase, described the existential state of writing in a social climate where there were few precedents for professional women writers: “I was writing anyway, I was writing nevertheless, I was writing despite” (2001, 138) The viscerality of this sentiment, and its stubbornness, be mapped against a climate where there are expectations for translating lived, embodied experience into the professional discourse of lived experience dismantle writing without a clear methodological or demands the courage to see that are fluid and subjective. The boundaries between the social sciences, physics, and philosophy are fluid and subjective. This bicoque is done in part to find a voice in the academy, but more importantly, to help her understand what she is experiencing and to communicate these experiences. It is done to give voice to the shifting terrain of the writer’s experience and to find others with whom this might resonate, and to help her understand what she is experiencing by the realization that reflection is a form of experience itself” (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 1993, 27). Thought impacts experience just as experience impacts thought. Opposites they coexist.

A startling examine in thinking and knowledge.

I was writing anyway, I was writing nevertheless, I was writing despite.

—Margaret Atwood, “If You Can’t Say Something Nice, Don’t Say Anything at All”
and to find others with whom this might resonate, and to help her understand her own experiences in such a way that others might find resonance in the process sustained by the realization that this secondary process or a commentary on it is the process of thinking that transforms the doing. "Varela's coauthors write, "is not just on reflection: it is a form of experience itself." (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 1993, p. 27).

Thought impacts experience just as experience impacts thought. Perhaps they caress each other.

A startling expansion of traditional research fields has occurred over the past decade and, especially in the arts, it has led to the development of new methodologies in psychology, philosophy, performance, media studies, ethnomusicology, architecture, and electrical engineering. Computation has been the warp to the interdisciplinarity of the field. Despite, or because of, the impulse toward plurality, methodological wars ensued at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The interdisciplinary academic circles in which I found myself, spanning arts, dance, design, and information technology, were perplexed by a return to positivism, to rigid formulae based on narrow conceptions of what constitutes validity and truth, combined with an intolerance for perceived ambiguity. Economic constraints and tightened

"I was writing anyway, I was writing nevertheless, I was writing despite."

--Margaret Atwood, "If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything at All"
can be mapped onto an intellectual climate where there are few conceptual paradigms for translating lived, embodied experience into the professional discourse of the academy. Writing from lived experience often amounts to writing without a clear methodological mandate, or demands the courage to assert that the methods are fluid and subjective. Paradigms are scraped together (defiantly, guilefully, playfully, intuitively) from philosophy, literature, the social sciences, physics. This bricolage or hybridization is done in part to find a voice in the academy, but more importantly, to help the writer herself understand what it is that she is experiencing and to communicate these experiences. It is done to give voice to the shifting terrain of the writer’s experience and to find others with whom this might resonate, and to help her understand her own experiences and express them in such a way that others might find meaningful. This sometimes precarious process is sustained by the realization that reflection is not only a secondary process or a commentary on experience, but also the process of

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in a short phrase, Irigaray captures the prevailing bias: ‘Our subjective experiences or our personal opinions can never be used to justify any statement,’ claims the epistemologist of science. The subjectivity of the researcher was mandated, by both explicit academic rules and implicit peer-enforced codes, to remain “irrelevant, bodiless, morphologically undetermined” (Irigaray 1993, 122, 133). Advancements in physics, science, and history from the first part of the twentieth century, such as the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, the observer as explicator of the observed, and the realization that...
thinking that transforms the doing. “Reflection,” Varela and his coauthors write, “is not just an experience, reflection is a form of experience itself” (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 1993, 27). Thought impacts experience just as experience impacts thought. Or perhaps they caress each other.

A startling expansion of traditional research fields has occurred over the past decade and, with it, increasing respect for inter-, multi-, or transdisciplinarity both within academia and beyond. Areas that have been involved in creative permutations include biology, psychology, philosophy, performance, mathematics, media, literature, cybernetics, visual art, music, architecture, and electrical engineering. Advances in computer sciences have been the warp to the weft of these areas, and design continues to emerge as the lining of it all. Despite, or because of, the impulse toward plurality, methodology wars ensued at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The interdisciplinary academic circles in which I found
myself on both sides of the Atlantic, spanning arts, dance, design, and information technologies, exhibited a perplexing return to positivism, to rigid formulas for research based on narrow notions of what constitutes validity and truth, combined with an intolerance for perceived mystification, obscurantism, or ambiguity. Economic constraints and tightened budgets for universities, emerging out of the “dot bomb” in the creative computer technologies sector, and the near eradication of national arts budgets in countries such as the United States, drew personal vulnerabilities to the surface and created, paradoxically, a narrowing of the spectrum of what constitutes valid research within the very contexts that were trying to expand and become multidisciplinary. A return was threatened, to the dominance of a paradigm based on an invisible observer conducting unbiased, objective, repeatable, verifiable experiments. Exhibiting her usual ability to sum up an intellectual state of affairs in a short phrase, Irigaray captures the prevailing bias: “‘Our subjective experiences or our personal opinions can never be used to justify any statement,’ claims the epistemologist of science.” The subjectivity of the researcher was mandated, by both explicit academic rules and implicit peer-enforced codes, to remain “irrelevant, bodiless, morphologically underdetermined” (Irigaray 1993, 122, 133). Advancements in physics, science, and history from the first part of the twentieth century, such as the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, the impact of the observer on the observed as explained by quantum mechanics, and the realization that progress in science occurs through the overturning of previous “absolute truths” (Kuhn 1996) were not always evident in wider fields of research. To my ever-increasing bafflement, in some interdisciplinary contexts where a range of methodologies could be relevant, the third-person perspective threatened to nullify the scope for the first-person perspective, as if innovative research occurred apart from the bodies and minds of the researchers. Concerned by this enduring blind spot, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1993) suggest, after Merleau-Ponty, that science deems itself strong by preferring to manipulate things rather than live among them, when in fact, “my body must itself be meshed into the visible world; its power depends precisely on the fact that it has a place from which it sees” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 166). Echoing this position, neurologist Richard Cytowic, in his study of synesthesia, encountered such resistance to accepting subjective experience, and such a tendency to believe anything that could be confirmed by “technology,” that he proclaimed our culture to be “addicted” to notions of external objectivity: “Questioning its [synesthesia’s] reality without first having some technological confirmation shows how ready we are to reject any first-hand experience. We are addicted to the external and the rational. Our insistence on a third-person, ‘objective’ understanding of the world has just about swept aside all other forms of knowledge” (1995, 9.1).

This willingness, in Cytowic’s words, “to accept the judgment of a machine” approaches a distorted version of what Merleau-Ponty calls...
To counterbalance this anachronistic, and simply weird, positivist turn occurring at the beginning of a new century, it became clear to me that a compelling approach to the validity of the subjective position in research was needed: a respect for the lived experience of the scientist, researcher, artist, designer, and writer, and an acknowledgement of the sometimes anarchic results borne from the marriage of perception and imagination in the process of thinking and doing. It also became clear that the perspective of dance and philosophy provides an authentic stance from which to reflect upon the wider implications of human bodies using digital technologies, filling a gap in scholarship and in broader cultural discourse around digital technologies. I became increasingly aware of the need for a generosity toward the different methodologies and results inevitable when people of many cultures, physicalities, genders, and training undertake research or creation in any field; at the same time, I developed a thirst for conceptual depth that could excavate and articulate experience, thereby pushing the whole field further. Unexpectedly, a visceral understanding of Husserl’s Crisis of European Sciences came out of this dual need. Written between 1934 and 1937, Husserl lamented the “positivistic reduction of the idea of science to mere factual science,” and the loss of science’s meaning for life through excluding the “valuative positions” of the “human subject matter and its cultural

iperceptual faith, distorted because instead of the faith being based in the thickness of our own sensory experience, it is transposed onto the results of computational processes and the assumptions behind the algorithms that control them.2 Varela, Thompson, and Rosch assert that the scientific position of resisting the validity of first-person lived experience of denying “what is most immediate and direct--our everyday, immediate experience,” is increasingly difficult to reconcile with advances in the field of cognitive sciences. A “deep tension” ensues (1993, 12). I add that this situation causes tensions in our current era of increasing convergence between the body and computers where there is a need to understand the artistic, social, and ethical implications of this convergence, and to implement sensible and sensitive new designs for human-computer interaction. It is not about accepting the judgment of one over the other, of first-person methodologies versus third-person methodologies, but of recognizing that knowledge is constructed through the engagement between bodies and machines within the world, and that this knowledge can be arrived at through a range of methodologies and voices.3

AN UNAVOIDABLE NECESSITY

to counterbalance this anachronistic, and simply weird, positivist turn occurring at the beginning of a new century, it became clear to me that a compelling approach to the validity of the subjective position in research was needed: a respect for the lived experience of the scientist, researcher, artist, designer, and writer, and an acknowledgement of the sometimes anarchic results borne from the marriage of perception and imagination in the process of thinking and doing. It also became clear that the perspective of dance and philosophy provides an authentic stance from which to reflect upon the wider implications of human bodies using digital technologies, filling a gap in scholarship and in broader cultural discourse around digital technologies. I became increasingly aware of the need for a generosity toward the different methodologies and results inevitable when people of many cultures, physicalities, genders, and training undertake research or creation in any field; at the same time, I developed a thirst for conceptual depth that could excavate and articulate experience, thereby pushing the whole field further. Unexpectedly, a visceral understanding of Husserl’s Crisis of European Sciences came out of this dual need. Written between 1934 and 1937, Husserl lamented the “positivistic reduction of the idea of science to mere factual science,” and the loss of science’s meaning for life through excluding the “valuative positions” of the “human subject matter and its cultural

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configurations” (Husserl 1970, 6). The changing world for Husserl, recalling that his writing spanned the turn of the twentieth century, the first world war, and the acceleration into the second, caused him to acknowledge “world enigmas that were unknown to earlier times” and to locate these not externally, but rather to say that “they all lead back to the enigma of subjectivity and are thus inseparably bound to the enigma of psychological subject matter and method” (ibid., 5). He spoke of “the unavoidable necessity of a transcendental-phenomenological reorientation of philosophy” (ibid., 3, note 1).

This book does not offer a transcendental phenomenology after Husserl; the approach that unfolds through reflections on the lived experience of performing in responsive technological systems is instead a highly existential phenomenology derived largely from the late work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I have been asked why I do not come up with a new name for this methodology, why I feel compelled to hold onto the old term, one that still bears traces of the Husserlian search for lasting truths or essences from out of experience. From a feminist perspective, phenomenology is often critiqued for failing to specify the kinds of bodies and sexualities behind the lived experience in question, or for an inability to deal with power relations embedded in perception. Further, Merleau-Ponty’s early work Phenomenology of Perception (1942) is seen to overlook his own corporeal complicity in his description of the body in its sexual being, resulting in his implicitly positing the viewpoint of the white, European, male (Butler 1988; Rothfield 2005). From a Deleuzian perspective, phenomenology is dismissed for being pinned to an archaic notion of the “body proper” (Gil 2002). If it weren’t for Merleau-Ponty’s late work I might have considered a new name for the approach to embodied inquiry that has emerged through performance work with digital technologies; but the choice was not simply intellectual, the raw appeal of the word “phenomenon” had an impact, spanning the human and nonhuman, animal and machine, microscopic and macroscopic. I believe in the ability of language to reinscribe meaning, in a sort of hermeneutic cycle of rebirth. So the word phenomenology had to stay, reworked from within and without, and through this reworking the preceding critiques are either addressed or countered.

Merleau-Ponty’s late work, the highly poetic, evocative, perplexing, and sometimes infuriatingly contradictory and opaque thoughts found in The Visible and the Invisible (1968) and in the monograph “Eye and Mind” (1964a) are my inspiration. The Visible and the Invisible is unfinished, it is loose and aphoristic not by intent but because it was incomplete when he died in 1961. It has the vibrancy of someone writing with the rush of new ideas, the courage of someone distancing himself from his previous limitations, and possibly the rashness of someone who is not worried about consolidating his academic position or political ties. (Merleau-Ponty severed his political ties with the French Marxist party and with Sartre some-
time before this.) “Eye and Mind,” written in 1959, is an essay on the art of Cézanne and embodied human perception. As indicated previously, these are the words I swallowed and digested, until I took a side step from the world of philosophy and entered the world of art as it was practiced, and worked within that world so that I could communicate with artists. The work of the Futurists and the Russian Constructivists in the 1910s used a range of devices and projections. What was lacking were methodological precedents. I was less concerned with the preoccupations of the argonauts of shadow; the act of disarming the imagination in order to wake the artist who teaches and who, in turn, teaches the artist who teaches and teaches us. What was lacking were methodological precedents. What was lacking were methodological precedents. What was lacking were methodological precedents. What was lacking were methodological precedents. What was lacking were methodological precedents. What was lacking were methodological precedents. What was lacking were methodological precedents. What was lacking were methodological precedents. What was lacking were methodological precedents. What was lacking were methodological precedents.
time before this.) “Eye and Mind,” written in 1959, is an essay on the art of Cézanne and embodied human perception. As indicated previously, these are the words I swallowed and digested, until I took a side step from the world of philosophy and came to dwell more directly in dance and computational arts. I was prepared to move on, to surrender the Merleau-Pontian preoccupations as those of an earlier self. Peculiarly, they never left me. In fact, the act of distancing myself from the academic world of philosophy, in order to work and teach as a dance artist collaborating across disciplines using a range of computer technologies, made me see the increasing relevance of a modified phenomenological approach, even the necessity of developing thoughtful and philosophically well-grounded first-person, or subjective, approaches to research. This seemed particularly true when collaborating on artistic projects with both low and high technologies: we needed to figure out what we were doing while we were doing it. We were short of precedents. It is true this work does not merit the moniker “new”: Loie Fuller and the Futurists worked with light, image, sound, and machines; Etienne-Jules Maréy and Eadweard Muybridge worked with motion capture; and many artists and performers in the 1960s used a range of devices and projections. What was lacking were methodological precedents. I was less concerned with formal, historical, or critical accounts of what previous artists did than I was with the implications for corporeality, intersubjectivity, and ethics, the transformations of time, space, and motion as understood through the flesh of the experience. This was not always documented. In true chiasmic fashion, I let Merleau-Ponty’s thought go and it rebounded on me, with the alluring twist of the Mobius strip. As I continued to make art, think, and teach, sensitive to the tremendous changes in the world, an expansion of phenomenology became for me, as it was for Husserl, an “unavoidable necessity,” and a creative and political imperative. Echoing Deleuze, “the notions of relevance, necessity, the point of something” became far more important, or, as he says, “a thousand times more significant than the notion of truth” (2001, 125). Relevant phenomenologies are called for.