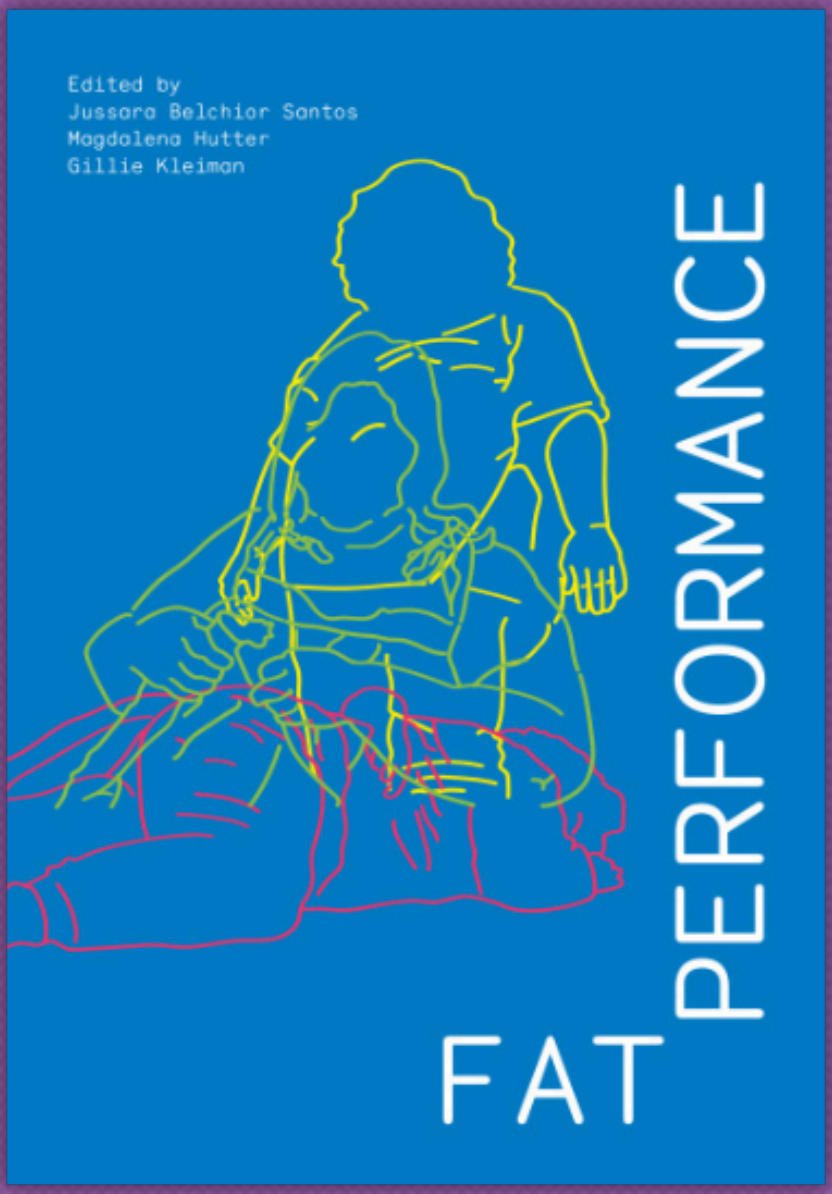
A conversation with the editors of *Fat Performance*

Jussara Belchior Santos, Magdalena Hutter and Gillie Kleiman



The conversation format features in the book *Fat Performance* as a way for practitioners and scholars to excavate details of practice and reflect on aspects of the intersections of fat and performance that are otherwise illegible.

After being asked to answer interview questions about the book, we took these as the starting point for a conversation about the project and its impact, which we recorded and transcribed. We have edited the text below for clarity and length.

Gillie

Should I read out the questions?

Magdalena

Sure, you do the interviewer.

Gillie

Okay, so: question one – 'what inspired you to bring together the first edited collection dedicated to fat performance and why did this feel like the right moment for the book?'.

Jussara (Ju)

I was actually thinking that the project took so long from when we started to where we are now that the right moment for the book has such a different meaning right now than at the beginning.

Gillie

I think there is something interesting about that. In that, when we started, when we met and had our 'meet cute' that we talk about in the introduction of the book, it was like at a peak of body positivity, in the general discourse...

Magdalena

...what we now recognize as a peak and at that point just felt like progress.

Gillie

Yeah. We were like, ‘we are riding this fucking wave. This is amazing. This is going to be our contribution to this wave. We need this specific bit of scholarship in our field to participate in this wave’, and we could not have known that that was the peak and then it was gonna go rapidly, really, into a trough of body fascism.

Magdalena

I don't think it felt as much like a wave as it looks in hindsight. Because submitting to that journal and being met with, ‘who cares? Why would this be enough for an entire journal issue?’...

Gillie

Yeah.

Magdalena

... there was still plenty of ‘why would you talk about this’ going around for it to just be like: no, we're just doing the work and yeah, there might be some momentum now, but there definitely needs to be way, way more momentum. And now looking back, we're like, wow, it was going so well and now it's so terrible again...

Gillie

Yeah...

Magdalena

...and in new ways.

Ju

So maybe we did have the right moment because maybe we wouldn't be able to do this right now. It's such a long process to get through all the steps, connect with all these people, such an international group and this attempt to be collective, reaching so many people from different places.

Magdalena

I mean, one reason why it felt like the right moment to do the book was because we were already gathered. We had met. We didn't know each other before the workshop that we met at and we met other people as well through that workshop. And so it already felt like there was a group. And then some people from the workshop actually ended up being contributors. So it sort of felt like the right moment because we all knew that there was a lack and we all had looked for a book like this and hadn't found it. But also in that moment felt like ‘wait, wait – we already have some of these people in the same space. Let's do something with that. And then draw in more and see what's missing’.

Gillie

I've been thinking. I've been trying to write a chapter for a different book about fatness as an agent of unlearning in dance and what I'm noticing is because, you know, this project has been a huge learning experience for me and I've read much, much more about fat and been talking to you two and others much more than I otherwise could have. I feel like I've kind of done like a master's in fat studies just by sort of being around and having to read things from outside the field that I come from. I was thinking about this thing of when we started this project, for you two, you were very used to thinking and talking about fat, and I was much less used to it and now I'm very, very used to it, to the point where I sort of find it confusing to think about it, because it's become the water I swim in.

Trying to be specific and pointed about the moments in the work that I've been doing, the practical, the studio-based work and the work with people, how those things have been a kind of broken mirror to dance as a field. I'm finding it harder to pull things out, but in a funny way I actually think, because of the environment that we find ourselves in, almost six years down the line from initiating this project, that it's actually more potent and it's more politically pointed to publish this book now. Especially because two of the chapters include famous fat people, famous fat performers, whose audience base was at least partially related to their fatness, who have engaged in intentional weight loss. And they're both still fat, but they're no longer politically fat in the same way and in an accidental way that we can't talk about in the book – because the book gets finished and then it takes another year for it to actually come out – it sort of documents that shift or points to that shift and I think that's really exciting.

Magdalena

Yeah.

Gillie

The datedness, maybe the specificity that this was a time that things were happening in a specific way and now they're not, allows us to see what has happened in broader discourses around fat people and fat bodies...

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*In 2020, Gillie ran a workshop with the Live Art Development Agency as part of their DIY scheme. Entitled 'Fat Performance DIY', it was a series of online sessions attended by international collaborators. Some of the activities of the workshop were turned into a zine, which can be found here.

Magdalena

...and it even sort of makes obvious that something has shifted about the performance of fatness in general, because the context has shifted. I think also the thing that, Ju, you were sort of pointing at is that – we'd be too tired, right? Like yes, yes, we're tired because we've been working on this for years. But I'm also too tired in this fatphobic environment to start such a big project right now. And I don't know how the contributors feel about that. The project is sort of a holdover from a time when there was a specific kind of energy and we get to pull it into this bleak moment.

Ju

I think the book would have a different... a different 'face', we'd say here in Brazil, a different vibe, because even though the book is not only one vibe, there are differences, nuances within the chapters, it would change the vibe completely if we were starting right now.

Gillie

It would be more embattled and maybe less celebratory. The book doesn't say one thing about fat performance because of course we've got lots of different contributors who come from different disciplinary heritages and have different purposes for writing, but on the whole, the book asks the question of: what does fat performance do? And I think asking that same question now could be more exasperating or more scary or have a different valence. A valence that would, in a way, position it affectively more as activist, whereas because we didn't have to do that, because we were making this book in a time where it was a given to an extent than other qualities of fat performance and fat performance scholarship could emerge. Because when it's a wholly activist book, it can be quite brute. Even though there are lots of strategies, but when the purpose is persuasion, then that can dull some other ways of thinking, because yeah, right now I feel a bit desperate for the lives of fat people, actually, and including myself. And feel a bit scared about where we are with everything and I felt less so in 2020 to 2023 or so.

Ju

I think you were already pointing to the second question. Maybe we should read it?

Gillie

Question two: ‘How do you define fat performance and what do you hope readers unfamiliar with the field will take away from the collection?’.

Magdalena

You have a definition for fat performance, Gillie.

Gillie

We use it in the book, don't we? We say something like, ‘fat performance is performance about fatness and/or made by fat people’.

Magdalena

I think there is also something like ‘that speaks to fatness’.

Gillie

Oh yeah, what did we write? I need to find the book.

Magdalena

I think it was something like ‘performance with, by, for and about fatness that speaks to fatness and fat meaning-making’.

Ju

I just think it's important that people know that it is a field. It might not have a sharp or unchanging definition. Actually, I don't think the arts usually have sharp definitions. Fat performance is a complex field, maybe seeing the collection, seeing so many different fat artists, practices and writing forms people can get a grasp on it. Yet there are so many subjects and practices that we weren’t able to include in this book – either because we couldn’t find anyone to write about it, or because those people didn’t find us at the time of the publishing call.

Gillie

I think in a way, for me, there are two scholarly disciplines or two worlds of scholarship that are engaged here. One is fat studies and one is performance studies, or different studies of performance. Performance studies is something specific. So there's dance studies, theatre studies, on and on. And I think I'm interested in people who come just from fat studies going ‘ah yes!’. In fat studies, there are a lot of geographers, sociologists, psychologists, people from the medical humanities. There are also people from hard sciences. I'm really interested for them to read something that is very specifically related to their field, but comes from a completely different perspective. It comes from deliberate meaning-making in public, which is what art is, or how I think about art; it might help them think differently about the things that they're doing, and give them new ways of thinking about fat people and fat subjectivity.

continued...

And then there are people from the performance disciplines, either in scholarship or in practice, where I want them to think seriously about fat people and also know that fat studies is its own separate discipline that has tools, methods, lineages, histories, albeit a short one or one whose lineages reach in into previous ones or come from particular kinds of sets of methods, which is the same as dance studies, right?

I want people to understand fat people as agentic in the meaning-making about their own bodies. And I think that's something that's present probably in all of the chapters of the book, that's something that fat performance can do – rather than fat people having meaning constantly applied to us by others and seeing us as sort of passive receptacles for that meaning, fat performance already does this thing of making fat people kind of agentic in their own meaning-making around their own bodies. But because lots of people find performance kind of either opaque or oblique, or the meaning-making doesn't always exist within language or within symbols or signs, but rather exists in experience and vibes and affects and subliminal things, a book can be really useful in making that as plain as possible, as plain as language can allow.

Magdalena

This sort of goes into the next question already, but I think it is something that for me was one of our hopes for readers who come from the outside, who are not already familiar with fat performance – just to tell them that that is a thing that exists. Because I think for many people that is still surprising. But then also, by way of the diversity in contributions and approaches and the different corners of fat performance that people are coming from, showing how broad it is and not trying to be like 'this is what fat performance is', but just opening something up by having some examples and some approaches.

Gillie

Yeah, it's less definitional and more like a kind of festival in book form.

Magdalena

I mean, I think what we kept saying was that what we want is sort of a starting point.

Ju

Yeah.

Magdalena

To make the thing that we wanted to see, but also to maybe make sure that other things will be made once it's been proven that it's possible and somebody will agree to publishing it. And there's people willing to do the work of writing the contributions, knowing that they're not getting paid.

Question three: ‘the book brings together scholars, artists and activists from a wide range of disciplines. How important was it for you to present fat performance as an interdisciplinary field?’.

Gillie

Very important.

Magdalena

Very. Period. Next question.

Ju

Fat studies is an interdisciplinary field, it's part of its core. There is no other way.

Gillie

And I also think different performance disciplines have different strategies around fatness and different kinds of problems with fatness and they might look like they're the same, but they're quite subtly different. So, thinking about fat people in front of a camera is its own particular thing, related to that medium, to that cameraness and how the gaze works, and how lenses work, and how time works across either in like still photography or in moving image, alike and different from each other. That's its own thing.

And then in theatre, you might be thinking more about how characters are formed around fat people. I'm thinking of Rachel's chapter, how a character is organized around the idea of fatness. Or in dance, that's the bit I know best, where dance is kind of exclusionary and disciplinary. It acts as a disciplinary force on the bodies that engage in it. Or in performance art. I'm thinking about Phoebe's chapter – there are already important questions in performance art that are about disgust or the abject or sexuality… So each of these performance disciplines speaks to or relates to the questions of fatness in different ways.

But then reading across everything, you start to see that there are also connections. I'm excited about how someone might pick up the book because they know about Charlotte Cooper and they read the conversation with Charlotte and Kay, but then they see a relationship between that and the group conversation of Ebony, Da'Shaun, Mary, Rob and Mikey, and they can think across the very big differences in the size of the group, the demographic aspects of the group, the geographical location of the group, the artistic practices of the group, the professionalization of the group – all of those things – but there's this connection between some of the things that they're proposing about intersectionality, for example.

Magdalena

It feels like part of the question is the different disciplines, but the other part of the question is also about scholars, artists and activists, and why it was important to not have a purely scholarly publication, but to have those differences in background and approach. And I think part of it probably has to do with the fact that all three of us are artists as well as scholars, so wanting both of those facets in the book feels just obvious, but I also think that there's something about just valuing different kinds of work and different kinds of engaging with the subject, and just saying 'yes, having a contribution that approaches the subject from a poetry or performance angle is just as valid as a heavily cited essay'. For me, there's some sort of analogue or parallel with the ways that I think fat performance lends itself specifically to centering the body, like not just going to the quantitative. Does that make sense?

Gillie

Yeah, it's about different forms of knowing.

Magdalena

Yes, thank you.

Gillie

Question four: 'As editors from different countries and artistic backgrounds, how did your individual experiences shape the vision for this collection?'.

Ju

I think Magdalena already talked a little bit about it, the way I see it. About us being artists and also scholars.

Magdalena

The first thing that I think is, yes, it's shaped by our individual experiences. It's also a little bit shaped by our collective inexperience with this particular process.

Gillie

Yeah, definitely.

Ju

Yeah.

Magdalena

None of us are – making books is not our job, but we sort of wanted to bring together the things that the three of us know how to do to make it happen. But yeah, I think the the vision part is what you just said, the fact that we're artists and scholars is just...

Ju

You said it, I just repeated it.

Gillie

At this stage, who said what? We've all each said all of these things so many times over the past six years. I have no idea whether what I'm saying is an original thought of my own or something that one of you said four years ago.

Ju

I'm okay with that.

Magdalena

That's why it's a collective process.

Gillie

But I think also that's the thing I thought about individual experiences. Yes, our individual experiences, but also this has been such a long project and we've also done other projects together, within – sort of inside of this experience. So it's also been very informed by our developing our friendships, friendship as a group, but also the individual friendships we each have with each other, and of course that comes to bear on how we can talk about an editing process, that it's not purely professional. Actually, we know each other personally now, and I think that although we had to fill in an author's questionnaire and name some things of like what the vision was, it was also just very processual, and the getting to know each other and getting to know what people are writing about, and getting to know how to do a book and all of those things all happened at the same time.

Ju

Yeah.

Gillie

Should we move on?

Question five: 'The volume includes everything from academic essays and autoethnography to conversations and poetry. Why was it important to embrace such a diverse range of voices and formats?'.

Magdalena

I think we said that, right?

Gillie

Yeah. I think there's also something about – in an emergent field, there isn't a kind of format that is the norm, so it's also part of the what the book offers is, well, how do we want to talk about fat performance? What ways could work? We don't know.

Magdalena

Yeah, and I mean some of it – having autoethnography be a prominent part of the range of approaches does have to do with the fact that that is an established thing in fat studies.

Gillie

And then also in practice-as-research and performance, autoethnography is also a kind of tool that is often picked up.

Magdalena

So, these things didn't come out of nowhere.

Gillie

Yeah.

Magdalena

And then poetry, again – it's a book about art. To not have it be creative feels wrong and specifically because it's about the performance of fatness and it's also about how the contributors perform themselves, including in the conversations. And I remember having these conversations about the conversations at the beginning of the process and people being like, 'well, this isn't actually a chapter. Maybe this can be in the accompanying blog post?'. But we noticed very quickly how many conversations there were and that clearly there was something there. There was something about that format that was obviously needed in this context and it is about relationality and legitimizing things that we want to talk about.

Ju

And the book has different kinds of conversations, the conversation chapters unfold in different ways, there are different relationships between these people that are in conversation. And also there's more than one little thing about the conversations, more than just an informal way of touching some topics, or speaking about experience. There is a lot that can be revealed in a conversation format, that is specific to dialogue as a method for fostering reflection and transformation.

Magdalena

The entire book only exists because there's a conversation between the three of us and then a conversation between the three of us and the contributors. And the thing that you just said, how you don't know anymore who said what at what point – that's the whole point. We're creating knowledge collaboratively,

Gillie

And that's what a community of practice is. A whole thing that can think together. Moving on.

Ju

Yep.

Gillie

Oh, I think we've answered this. Question six.

Ju

‘Performance has the power to challenge social norms. In what ways can fat performance reshape conversations around bodies, representation and visibility?’.

Gillie

I feel like I've answered what I can of that.

Magdalena

Yeah.

Ju

Well, there are so many answers available in the book. Read the book!

Gillie

Exactly. Read the book and you'll know.

Magdalena

We can't spoil everything.

Gillie

Yeah. Should we move on?

Magdalena

Yeah. Also, question six and eight sort of interlock again...

Gillie

Question seven: ‘The book takes an intersectional approach to fatness. Why is it essential to consider fatness alongside identities such as race, gender, disability and queerness?’.

Magdalena

Because people have more than one identity, so people's lived experience is never just about one facet of their identity. And we're not nearly covering everything. But I don't think you can talk about fatness without considering other identities. Not just because they come together in a person's life, but also because of how these disciplines are lineaged, because of how they're connected in terms of social justice movements and politics.

Ju

We end up pulling from it as well. All those social movements end up informing and enriching the fat studies field.

Gillie

I mean, fat studies has documented quite clearly the relationship – and of course, there's ever more work to do – between Blackness and fatness, and specifically, well, actually not Blackness and fatness, the relationship between anti-Blackness and anti-fatness, including in *Belly of the Beast* by Da'Shaun Harrison, who's one of the contributors, as well as others. But I always think also about – and this has also been contested – the relationship between disability or crip movements and social justice that focuses on fat people. Of course, there's a crossover between disabled people and fat people, but there are also tensions around how we describe those terrains and who gets to be seen and known within them. And equally, I don't know if you guys would agree, but fat studies and fat activism owes a lot to queer studies and LGBTQIA+ social movements in thinking about desire and acceptability and appropriateness and the kind of wantedness of particular bodies in the world. So in a way, fat performance is asking similar questions or trying to articulate or activate similar terrains.

Magdalena

One thing that I just thought because of the way the question is phrased is, it's almost, well, is fatness as important as – does it fit in there in that row with race, gender, disability, and queerness? And I think one thing that happens frequently, is that the fact that it is still socially acceptable to be fatphobic is used as a way to be ableist and anti-Black and bigoted.

Gillie

Yeah.

Magdalena

That something seems acceptable because it says it's about fatness when really the ways in which it tries to dehumanize people are very, very much connected to all of these other oppressed identities.

Ju

Also because fat can be fluid. We already mentioned weight loss and intentional weight loss and all bodies do change, intentionally or not. They get larger or smaller. This fluidity also makes it harder for people to understand why fatness has to be considered a movement, a discipline. The idea in the exclusionary society in which we live is that you should just lose weight and you should not talk about being fat. Well, we are proudly fat – most of the time – and we are talking about it, that's part of the book's discourse, the fat experience.

Magdalena

Question eight: ‘What were some of the biggest challenges in editing a volume that spans so many disciplines, perspectives and lived experiences?’. Were there challenges related to that? No. I mean, there was some challenge in selling it.

Gillie

The editing was, that wasn't – having this variety, I think makes for it to be a really good read.

Magdalena

Yeah.

Gillie

Honestly.

Magdalena

It's not like we – we didn't grade them, right? So it's not like we had to compare apples and oranges. I think probably the biggest challenge is that we don't have even more variety and diversity in people's backgrounds and it's still a largely white collection.

Gillie

Yeah.

Magdalena

It's still a mostly English-speaking collection. I don't think that the challenges came from the diversity at all because it's not like we compared or had to fit the contributions into one mould. I think one challenge maybe was about how to order them because there were so many connections between all of these contributions, which was really lovely, but we had to put them in a linear form.

Gillie

And that's why we didn't choose to have sections. Some edited collections have sections where this is about that and this is about that. But it didn’t make sense to do that because we had like 16 different versions...

Magdalena

Yeah.

Gillie

...and then Google stopped making that thing and we couldn't use that board.

Magdalena

That was the biggest challenge. When they retired the Jamboard.

Ju

The Jamboard, yeah. I think the challenge was finding a time for us to meet when we needed to do stuff together.

Gillie

Yeah, all practical things. Magdalena's out of action for like eight weeks of the year because she's en route to somewhere else.

Magdalena

That’s overstating it...

Ju

Different time zones.

Gillie

Different time zones, different lives.

Magdalena

All on the independent hustle. Also, having a ton of contributors, just having to communicate with so many people. But also, that's what we wanted. We wanted to represent a wealth of perspectives and contributions. So that seems fine.

Gillie

And I also think our inexperience, which is also a kind of boon, because I think we probably went into levels of detail and a kind of thoughtfulness that maybe a more experienced person would be like, ‘no, we don't really need to talk about that. That'll sort itself out’. But because we didn't know what was going to sort itself out and what we needed to be really active with, it meant that we were really active about everything, and I think that's probably resulted in us knowing the book better than we otherwise would have done and, I don't know about you guys, but me getting more out of this process than just like, oh yeah, I'll just chuck some things together and make sure there's no spelling mistakes or whatever. But also, I've got a lot of confidence in the book as an offer. I know what it is and I know where its weak spots are, too, but I feel like there's a lot there that everybody should read.

Magdalena

‘How do you hope that *Fat Performance* will influence future research, teaching, and creative practice within performance studies and beyond?’.

Gillie

I just really hope that the conversation about body size doesn't die, because I feel like we were in a moment where people were quite interested in having this conversation, at least in my kind of reach and I can already feel that conversation sort of drifting away and people are being less enthusiastic about thinking deeply about the impact of not having any fat performers on young people who engage in dance, for example. They're less interested in the damage that being body fascistic has because the outside environment is not providing any friction to that. So I feel kind of alone in this friction. In a way, I hope that the book can be another little poke, like: no, no, remember, remember, you cared about people three weeks ago.

Magdalena

I hope that the fact that the book exists can make things easier for people who want to do work around fat performance, be it in their research, their art, or be it teaching. They can just assign the book, they don't have to do the thing anymore where they cobble together things from 400 different corners of the internet. And also, just the legitimizing effect of: there is a book now. That happened. It was important, it was important enough for this to happen, so it can continue to be important. People who want to start projects can be like, ‘no, no, look, it's a field’.

Gillie

It's a field that is represented by a mainstream academic publisher, albeit one that has already published on fat and is interested in fat. We didn't have to do a lot of convincing about that with Intellect. They were on board immediately. They knew that that was something that people need to read about and I feel really quite grateful for that because, yeah, that wasn't our experience across the board. And Intellect were really, really ready. But before that, the way you read about fatness and performance, or knew about people doing stuff specifically about fatness was, if it was written down, it was in blogs or zines, or one article in some kind of hidden place where it's actually called something else, and you have to dig around for things, and that's hard work. And especially if you're a fat person and you already feel sort of delegitimized as a student or as a scholar or as an artist, it's like, I don't have to do this other extra thing, just to get through my days and read about some fat people.

Ju

Yeah and the book also points out to other things, too. So it actually works as a starting point.

Gillie

Yeah.

Magdalena

Last one.

Gillie

Question nine: ‘What conversations about fatness in the arts do you feel are still missing and where do you see the field heading next?’. I mean, this will be different for each of us according to our sort of specific contexts.

Magdalena

I'm not sure I'm equipped to answer the question of where the field is heading next.

Gillie

I think literally every conversation about fatness in the arts is missing. There's hardly any conversation. So, it's very hard to point to a gap when there's like an absolute absence.

Magdalena

A wasteland.

Gillie

Yeah. It's a bit like how we quote Charlotte and Kay's chapter in the introduction talking about how can we point to a gap when there's nothing. And definitely in my field, or in live art, there's more questions about non-normative bodies in general. That is the part of what live art, performance art, kind of experimental performance does. But in dance, I mean, please – people are still putting like some fat guy in a leotard and pointe shoes and going, you know, as if that's the epitome of what a fat person can offer to the world, of just like being a pretend thin person. Yeah, we've got a long way to go, a long, long way.

Ju

Oh, or people are surprised that fat people can move.

Gillie

Yeah. You have that experience all the time, Ju. I really noticed that in studios, people being like, ‘wow, you're like a professional dancer. Yeah, like really good at dancing’.

Ju

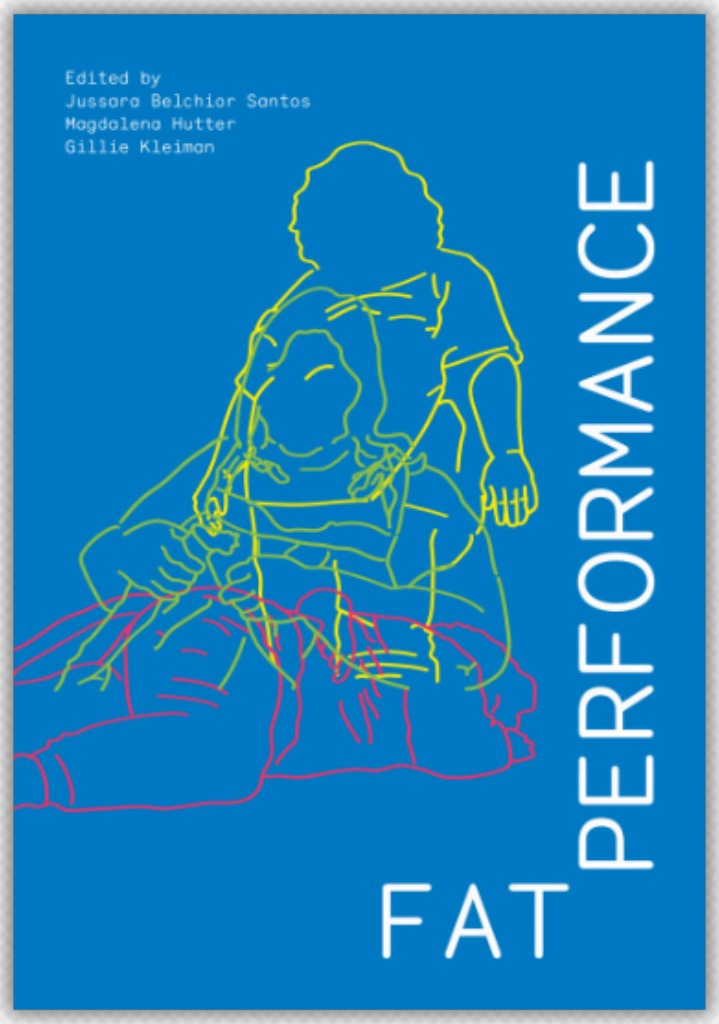
I'm actually excited to find out what is coming. I'm interested in being part of this building field.

Magdalena

Yeah, I hope there's going to be more. Basically, I hope it isn't the end of the process for us. Maybe it's the end of this editing process – hopefully, please – but yeah, I hope it expands.

Ju

Yeah.



Fat Performance

Edited by Jussara Belchior Santos, Magdalena Hutter and Gillie Kleiman