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Isabelle Choinière, *Communion*, International Dance and Technology Conference, Arizona State University, Tempe, USA, February 26, 1999. La Mue de l'ange, Théâtre La Veillée, Montréal. October 13-23, 1999

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PERFORMANCE

TEMPE, MONTRÉAL

A NETWORK CHOREOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

Isabelle Choinière, *Communion*, International Dance and Technology Conference, Arizona State University, Tempe, USA, February 26, 1999. *La Mue de l'ange*, Théâtre La Veillée, Montréal. October 13-23, 1999

A ghostly light gradually eats up the darkness at the center of the stage revealing an other-worldly figure bounded by an opaque background and a translucent foreground – a scrim, with two more scrims angled back on either side. As your eyes adjust, you see Isabelle Choinière posed in profile like a statuesque high-priestess in her sacrarium. You might think a Roman-pagan term like that archaic when talking about Choinière, the techno-femme of dance.

She choreographs with and dances with technology in collaboration with multimedia artist, Jimmy Lakatos, and sound artists, Alexandre Burton and Michael David Smith. Working with these collaborators, she places her minimalist choreography at the heart of a highly technologized *mise en scène* that is at the same time strangely primal, spiritual, mythic and futuristic.

Based in Montréal, not heaven or Mt. Olympus, she uses terms like sacralite, from the word sacré – relating to that which is holy. In describing her work and its intentions, she mixes terms like ritual, electronic scarification, and biradiality, stopping short so far, of using a word like transubstantiation.

Yet transubstantiation – the changing of bread and wine into body and blood – is, on one level, at the heart of the title of Choinière's half-hour performance, *Communion* (in a related earlier work, *Le Partage des Peaux*, she makes the claim that she is electronically transferring her skin onto screens). I refer throughout to a performance of *Communion* I saw at the International Dance and Technology conference in Tempe, Arizona. Her title further suggests the artist's connection with humanity from its inception and into the future. With at least these two meanings, I find it helpful to view Choinière in two separate ways before I reconcile the views. She is the goddess/earth mother – ancient, fecund and organic, and the explorer/scientist – probing, testing, incorporating, and discarding.

I was more aware, at first, of the aural events than the visual. Electronic whispers called upon the goddesses Isis, the feminine life giver; Diana, one of three virgin Roman goddesses and Apollo's twin; and Hecate, the chthonic Greek goddess of the crossroads. From time immemorial, spiral dances have been used to evoke the goddess spirit. As the whispers died down, Choinière slowly revolved while reproducing her imago on the fore scrim in the ceremony she calls "electronic scarification".

By now, she has begun to twist with serpentine deliberateness. Her muscular micro-movements, like stop-

frames in a film, referenced a virtual roll call of 20th century dance and performance. I thought of Loie Fuller, who "dematerialized" herself with lights and gauze, and Mary Wigman, who brought German Expressionism to dance. Her vocalizations brought Meredith Monk to mind. When a red light began to glow from inside her cheek, she plunged her fingers into her mouth and pulled the light out like a stream of hot lava and with it a sound as molten as any Diamanda Galas ever emitted.

In slow, film-like dissolves which she controlled by her light sensors as much as by movement, she reveals the temple dancer and the body builder. A flick of the right heel suggested an exotic dancer deflecting the train of her gown. It also suggested that Choinière could have been kicking aside the wire to her sensored leotard, which, she says, at one time she did. But the technology is farther advanced now. Now she is unplugged. Her body wiring operates by remote sensors, the heel flick a primordial habit from an earlier time in technological history.

Other writers on Choinière apprehend her earth mother aspects. Andrée Martin in two publications describes her as having a "sensual, even motherly-looking body" and earlier says the curves of her body [are] "at times almost maternal"¹. Another writes of her pre-Columbian body – the archetypal model of the earth mother². And still another states that the space in *Communion* is simultaneously a camera obscura (ultrasound?) a video monitor and a uterus³. Quite so. It is a matrix (womb) for the past, present, and future.

Choinière's dancing is full of male imagery too: that of the discus thrower, or of Atlas who must support the weight of the world after revolting against the gods. All this imparts a classical formality to the movement. This classical element affirms that her use of technology is not a revolt. It is instead an extension of what the physical body can do and has done. She asserts, in an interview, "In several places in the work, I am invoking the technology (image, sound) – that is a shifting of my self. I wanted this for [my] personal experience and to create a critical point of view about the shifting of sacralite toward technology. The technology is used in a very performative way, even a very *macho way*".

Of course the "macho" aspect of her work reminds me of Nijinsky's masculinity and androgyny. His *Afternoon of a Faun* kept coming to mind. Like him, Choinière made a statement from the very first sounds and images, and relentlessly did not deviate from it. She once wrote







about the different strata of consciousness inherent in dance – the altered state or physical intelligence⁴. And though the tableau-like setting and pacing may have restricted the work from developing in other ways, Choinière explored every level of richness at her physical and technological command.

Other writers note this as well as her use of interactive technology, comparing her to Marie Chouinard in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*⁵ or describing Choinière as a “ post-modern faun ”.⁶

Choinière's descriptions of “ electronic scarification ” and an “ amplification of corporeality ” aside, the projected images are seldom figurative. Mostly, they are variations of sine waves. While the images deliquesce before our eyes, Choinière is rooted to the earth, real and surreal, solid and corporeal against the technical (though highly spiritualized) ephemera. Wearing her “ data suit ” – a wiring system that allows her to control the sound and lighting, her wire-thickened thighs look faun-like, or, like child-bearing thighs.

As the explorer/scientist she invents and destroys, employing only what is useful in the development of the new form she is re-birthing (as are others in her field), and thus remaining within an evolutionary framework.

For Choinière, several technologies linked together are essential to her performative intent. “ Video and computer animation permit my skin (and inner experience) to be transferred on[to] a synthetic membrane in a way that is an experience of electronic ritual ”.

Further, with sound and voice transformation she amplifies the organic quality of the real body, while with the interactive system (sensor box and flex sensors) she creates an intimate and organic link with light, voice transformation and sound.

“ The flex sensor ”, she says, “ calculates the angle of my body (ex : armpit) and the variation of the data gives continuous information control. The flow (organic and electronic) is transferred from the inner body to the outer body ”. She effects the voice transformation by instinct and by “ using the natural sound that I make when I move. But the choice of the right voice transformation was always supported by instinct ”.

At the moment, Choinière and two new collaborators are working on *La Mue de l'ange*, a continuation of her explorations of the relationship between the real body and the synthetic body. Composer Thierry Fournier controls the software programming and develops the network interactivity, while François Roupinian designs the normal and the robotic lighting. She says it is “ A network choreographic exploration that presents the real body, the sonic body and the luminous body which is composed by light and video ”. *La Mue de l'ange* premiered in October 1999 at Théâtre La Veillée in Montréal, and will be performed in February 2000 at *Le Mois de la Multi* in Québec.

By immersing herself in the technology, Choinière becomes naturalized in its language. The more naturalized she becomes in this language, the more internalized it appears. The work translates to the audience as a hybrid event, at once organic and technical. Remembering the human invention of the technology, we acknowledge that the technology takes the visual and aural aspects of Choinière's performances beyond what the human body can do. Finally, *Communion*, *La Mue de l'ange* and all of Choinière's work is, like the Mass, a celebration of the body. No matter how daunting the technology may seem, the body remains the chalice of meaning.

MERILYN JACKSON

NOTES

¹ *Ballett international tanz aktuell*, August 3, 1997 and *Le Devoir*, Montréal, June 3, 1997.

² Linde Howe-Beck, *Mirror*, January 11, 1996.

³ Mauricio Arrudo Mendonca, *Falha de Landrina*, Brazil, June 6, 1995.

⁴ Isabelle Choinière, *Inter Art actuel*, Québec, Fall, 1993.

⁵ *Ballett international tanz aktuell*, August 3, 1997 and *Le Devoir*, Montréal, June 3, 1997.

⁶ Marie Delagrave, *Le Soleil*, October 27, 1994.