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The Body, Video

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See table of contents

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Questions

SHARIR and GROMALA : The project and process of creating a piece in VR led us to far more questions, and to a great deal of artistic possibilities. In such interactive environments, for instance, which are contingent upon the interaction of others, the notions of creator and audience blur. Is the very nature of art and dance altered by this potential ? Just where does the performance occur — within VR itself, in distributed sites, in cyberspace ? Are some participants relegated to being passive audience members and others performers ? How does one determine who gets represented in the VR environment ? How can this technology be accessible to larger audiences capable of interacting directly with the simulation ? When does the multiple cause-and-effects of user participation become mere chaos ?

How are we to understand the artwork ? Are these virtual environments, these simulations to be understood in terms of the Platonic idea of mimesis, or a problematized instance of BAUDRILLARD's simulacra, a place where Deleuzian fragmented and schizophrenic identities can further shatter themselves into ever smaller pieces ? Is a collective identity of interactors from distributed sites possible in such a modality-rich environment ?

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THE PERFORMANCE OF AN ENCOUNTER : THE BODY, VIDEO

Christine ROSS

The installation in question is made up of only a single element : a giant screen installed in the back of a dark room. Video images of floating blocks of light are projected on a black background, progressively replaced by electronic snow which scans the screen from bottom to top and then from top to bottom. The audio track emits a continuous pulsation resembling the constant but rapid beating of a human heart. The crucial element of the installation is the placement and dimension of the screen : it is installed close to the ground, and conceived within human dimensions. The screen solicits the body of the viewer in its entirety. In front of this electronic ROTHKO the viewer's eyes will attempt to link the pixels and draw a landscape or a human figure in order to shield oneself from the void that one is confronted with. It is at this point that s/he will realize how much one's vision oscillates between hallucination and the phantasmal projection. What's more, the screen rapidly becomes a skin in a process of formation, a border which consolidates the limit of the spectator's body who moves in front of it, but which also destabilizes this border because the screen is all vibration, pulsation and electronic scanning.

These *Interférences mnémoniques* (*Mnemonic interferences*), created by Ariane THÉZÉ in 1992, are an image production machine, images which cancel each other out, like a fleeting memory. They plunge us into the universe of what we now call the new images, defining them as frames which one doesn't know exactly how to view and which ceaselessly disturb the gaze (through the insertion of hallucinations and phantasmal imagery) and the body (whose limits are becoming increasingly hybridized with the electronic). As such they are like questions thrown out at the spectator : What is it to see ?, What is the body ?, To whom does the beating heart belong ?.

An installation such as this makes it evident to what degree the notion of the representation of the body in video is inappropriate. It would, indeed, be more accurate to speak of a performance of the body instead, since the image no longer serves the function of reproducing or referring to a body that exists prior to its representation. The videographic performance of the body is the movement made by the body as biological unit, it is that which does not cease to call into question the body as an organism defined by a skin, or skin-self, whose normative function (based on which one distinguishes the so-called sick body from the so-called healthy body) is to ensure a coherence, a distinction and distance between the self and the other.

The destabilization of the body in video may take on different forms, but mostly it takes on the form of two simultaneous operations : on the one hand, a putting into question of the body's limits, and on the other, an always failed attempt to reconstruct its borders. It is as though it were no longer possible to fully and permanently ensure the impenetrability of the body, its impermeability, its distinctiveness, its difference. The destabilization is, therefore, and this is my hypothesis, that which triggers an uncertainty as to its limit, it is an image which raises these questions : Where does the body end and where does technology begin ? How does one distinguish identity from alterity ? These are questions which *Mnemonic Interferences*, and video in general, try to answer and which inevitably end in a failure of sorts, but a failure which I would nonetheless qualify as productive.

This question of the limit also brings with it the question of the visible. The destabilization is not just developed on the level of content, it does not only make visible a different body, it must also put into play a difference which modifies the status of the visible. In video the visible, as the field of that which is seen, which can be seen, that which can be perceived, or is made perceivable to the senses, is that which is constituted precisely where the body fails to maintain itself as a unit. In other words, the video destabilization of the body does not only consist of a « different » body (those bodies which the norm excludes from subjectivity — women, gays to name but two groups), but also of a « body » called into question by the vacillation of the visible, that is a body, which although it appears as actualized in an image, fails to be stabilized by this actualization. The key question, within the context of this inquiry into the destabilization of the body in video, is therefore the following : what is it to represent a different body ? Or to put yet another way, and here I paraphrase and reformulate the Italian philosopher Giorgio AGAMBEN : How can one confer upon the visible not a « morality » (according to which the image would be thought in the light of what must exist as potentiality) but an « ethics » ? It is in the end run a matter of thinking the image in the light of subjective experience of potentiality, through a laying bare of the inactuality which is proper to being[1].

A second video, *La desserte blanche* (1980) (*The white sideboard*) by Thierry KUNTZEL, is crucial in this regard, because here we are dealing with a representation of the body which is being formed directly out of the tension of the visible and the invisible, in a process of materialization and dematerialization. Here, the images' workings cause the represented body to disappear all the while maintaining it on a white screen, as a trace or an imperceptible mnemonic expansion of the body. These workings of the image do not confer a visibility as much as a potentiality, which is rendered by the body's failure to stabilize the visible. If this failure is what allows for the body's future actualizations, it is because it corresponds to the body's incapacity to ensure its limit : the « skin » does not cease to be confused with the grain of the image and the electronic scanning. Through this electronization of the body, the visible does not only bring the body into view, it also shows dissolution, which is, moreover, never irreversible.

So what do we mean by « different body » ? One must first specify that the body of *La desserte* is not just any body, since it is the body of woman (in an iconography borrowed from MATISSE). This means that the dematerialization of the image is operating on a body that is already dematerialized by Western philosophy. A priori, therefore, it seems that this video only consolidates the metaphysical dematerialization of « woman », since it uses it as the support for his dematerialization of the image. In her essay *Veiling Over Desire : Close-ups of the Woman* (1989), Mary Anne DOANE[2] argues that the images that perturb the readability of the feminine body in this way (the veiled Marlene DIETRICH, framed in close-up by Joseph von STERNBERG, for example), do in fact nothing more than reinstate woman as non-subjectivity[3]. This is certainly true. *La desserte*, however, goes further. On the contrary the feminine body is also that which endlessly seeks to affirm itself in the image, because the disappearance of the body, and here I draw on an idea formulated by Laurence LOUPPE, is always « reversible[4] ». A body dissolves, but only to better reaffirm itself, to spread itself, change, gain in momentum ; a bodily virtuality is established precisely through the materialization-dematerialization process. Such is the body of *La desserte* : not a body of woman reproduced in its difference (re-excluding that which is already excluded) but a body that affects the visible of representation.

Two feminist publications (especially if they are read in parallel) are, in my view, crucial for an examination of the possibilities of this re-signification of the body : *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance* (1993) by Peggy PHELAN[5] and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) by Judith BUTLER. The keyword to be remembered here is « performance ».

For Peggy PHELAN, if the image is a performance it is because it is always more than it mediates ; it is, moreover, never an absolute reproduction of the real, and that is why it must account for the lack of equivalence between the real and its representation. The « body » must be therefore represented as this element which can never be fully resolved. In other words, and this is the ethics of the visible which PHELAN develops in *Unmarked*, the representation of the body must integrate the incompleteness, loss, disappearance, and also the invisible. Here we are at the confines of *Mnemonic Interferences* and *La desserte*. Nonetheless KUNTZEL's *La desserte* still permits us to push PHELAN's proposition a little bit further. In elaborating a reversible disappearance of the body, this monoframe integrates a sense of loss which would become problematic if it corresponded to the pure and simple loss of a feminine body.

In fact, would not such an interpretation end up affirming the status quo of loss ? Would it not assure that this lost something (for example the feminine body) must remain irremediably lost ? If we pay close attention to what is written in PHELAN's *Unmarked* this lost something is in fact the name of « woman », the excluded category of the Symbolic, which haunts (like a ghost) the confines of the representational visible. The lost is a Real whose absence one must accept, because, as she says, that which is lost cannot and must not be seen or named, it is that which threatens the subject with absorption or annihilation[6].

Thus, even though this ethics of integration of disappearance, proper to performance, is crucial for a critique of the dominant images of the body, it ends up reproducing the historically constituted abjection of the subject, the one which works through the social order, where access to the symbolic is made through an identification with the heterosexual law that forecloses a category of beings from the field of subjectivity based on gender, sexual orientation and race. That is why the dialectic of difference-via-abjection/difference-through-connection put forward by Judith BUTLER in *Bodies that Matter*[7] is useful (despite the insufficient critique of the visible) to the extent that there one finds a definition of performance which avoids the pure and simple reinstallation of the impossibility of a certain category of beings to be actualized.

For Judith BUTLER the body is the materialization of the norms with which the subject identifies in order to constitute him/herself. But it also corresponds to that which exceeds these norms, to the extent that it is this element which never completely conformed to the norms which it materializes. To put it differently, the body fails to be the linguistic or visual sign which describes it, it is incapable, in a culture where the dominant sexual organization is heterosexual, to reproduce, for instance, the « masculine » or the « feminine » which it seeks, by necessity or obligation. This means that the body re-signifies, re-constitutes the signs which it is supposed to reproduce in the moment when it materializes them.

This failure to imitate the norm makes evident the performative dimension of language and for BUTLER as for PHELAN (the two theorists cross paths here) it is here that the condition for a possibility of change resides. Thus, for PHELAN, if the function of representation is to reproduce the referent, performance is a representation without the possibility of reproduction[8]. This definition of performance is an elaboration of the one developed by John Langshaw AUSTIN in his book *How to do things with words* (1962), in which he establishes the famous opposition between constative and performative statements. On the linguistic level the constative statement is one that describes things in the world, while the performative statement endows language with a particular power ; « saying » something in fact corresponds to « doing » (instead of describing) that which is said. The performative simultaneously becomes the act to which it refers, as in « I promise », « I authorize you », which is a promise, an authorization as such.

In video, one can thus speak of a performance of the body (and not just simply a representation) when the image is what « makes » the body, that is to say when it produces the body, makes it act. Several years ago Jean-Paul FARGIER spoke of the « frame beings » of video[9]. He was not mistaken : that these bodies are ghostlike is of no matter since their effects are real, as in THÉZÉ's *Mnemonic interferences* and KUNTZEL's *La desserte*, where the image becomes the expanded body either of the spectator in front of the image, or the woman represented in the image, in a sort of breathing or living memory. The body in video is in a way an empty signifier, which is powerful enough, thanks to its performative character, to produce an active reception by the subject, whose corporeality is put into question, even if the signifier fails to produce that which it promises to produce. *Interférences* and *La desserte*, moreover, integrate this failure, since here the truth of the body is always, through the materialization-dematerialization process of the image, about to disappear in order to be otherwise re-actualized. This is where, according to BUTLER, one localize the possibility of what she calls the « futureness » of the body. The failure, the obviousness of the sign « body », is that which is opened up on its contingency, re-identification an re-interpretation.

In following an ethics which joins an aesthetics of video, BUTLER argues in the end run that the new images must allow for the infinite diversity of the body's re-actualizations, to which the inactuality of the subject is linked in relation to the signs which it seeks but fails to materialize. This diversity is part of a logic of connection, to the extent that it disturbs the unity of the subject which is constituted by exclusion of the other[10], and also to the extent that the materiality of video is always confused (in varying degrees, and more less manifestly) with the body its represents. The distance which separates language, video and the body is never certain. This confusion introduces a doubt on the plenitude of what we see ; it is perhaps at this precise moment that the image, according to DIDI-HUBERMAN's formulation, is beginning to look at us[11], and thereby destabilizing us . ●

[1] Giorgio AGAMBEN, *The Coming Community (La communitá che viene*, 1990), translated by Michael HARDT, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, coll. « Theories out of Bounds », vol.1, 1993, p. 44.

[2] Mary Ann DOAN, « Veiling Over Desire: Close-ups of the Woman », in Richard FELDSTEIN and Judith ROOF, eds., *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 105-141.

[3] Ibid., p. 135.

[4] see Laurence LOUPPE, « Intermittences du corps », in *Thierry Kuntzel*, Paris, Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1993.

[5] Peggy PHELAN, *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 2-3.

[6] Ibid., p. 26.

[7] Judith BUTLER, *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive Limits of « Sex »*, New York, Routledge, 1993.8. Phelan, p. 3.

[8] PHELAN, p. 3.

[9] Jean-Paul FARGIER, « Deuxième séance : la fiction vidéo entre le cinéma et la télévison », in C.A.C., ed. *Actes du coloque vidéo, fictio et cie. 2e Manifestation internationale de Montbéliard*, Paris VII, 1984, p. 27-30.

[10] BUTLER, p.103.

[11] see George DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1992.

Translated from French by Bernard SCHÛTZE

SPECIES ART ?

Mary Anne FARAH

In my continuing research on the significance of electronic interactivity to the relationship between the art object and the viewer, I have noticed that several electronic artists are creating work that embodies the theme of *technologies as a species*.

Technologies Mimic Living Forms

The title alone of Toronto artist David ROKEBY's interactive set up — « Very Nervous System » — used in various art installations and performances around the world[1], implies that the electronic sensors of technologies indicate the existence of an autonomous nervous system analogous to the biologically-based nervous systems of advanced species. The early works of Nam June PAIK which superimpose body parts with technologies — such as *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1967) and *TV Penis*[2] — may indicate that technologies have superseded the limits of the nervous system and are acquiring human form. In his later series *Family of Robots* (1986), PAIK broadened this theme to imply the complete infiltration and replacement of the entire human body with technologies[3]. Works like this offer, among others, two interpretations : the human form is becoming « technologized » and/or technologies are mimicking the human species.

Family Portrait (1993) relates to PAIK's *Family of Robots*. However, in this work, Montreal electronic artist Luc COURCHESNE explores the issue of information exchange between humans and machines within a social context ; participants can dialogue with machine — dependent personalities which are « aware » of each other[4]. Using this work as a springboard, one can ask whether this suggested « awareness » implies a distinct consciousness or socialization potential of machines.

More like PAIK's robotic works, Australian artist STELARC openly associates technologies with human form through performances like *The Third Hand* (1981+). His oeuvre suggests the inability of the body to cope with modern demands and implies that technologies are materializing as cancerous electronic growths through their echoing of human form. STELARC's perception of the capacity of technologies to change human behaviour and physiology are expressed when he relays, as Marshall McLUHAN did in 1964[5], that the continuity of the human species may be jeopardized :

Through its success in making technology, gathering information and unplugging itself from the planet, the body has created new evolutionary pressures which threaten the survival of the human species... Although imploding, miniaturized technology reintegrates and amplifies the individual, it disintegrates the species[6].

If the dominance of technologies threatens the continuance of the human body as it now functions, what does the future hold for the human form ? STELARC claims that the morphology of the body will diversify to deal with the changing demands associated with long term technological use. STELARC proposes that the final result will be the emergence of newly diversified physical forms and the surpassing (or disintegration) of the traditional bodies we presently inhabit :

... just as the splitting of the atom unleashed enormous energies, so the splitting of the human species by imploding technology will generate tremendous biological potential, resulting in an enriched and energizing diversity of the human phylum[7].

Aside from infrequent texts like Jerry MANDER's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, it is the layperson's belief that technologies, like television, do not threaten the existence of the body, but serve as independent tools for human use. Hence, their operation and integration is continued with full force. With this consideration, they are not regarded as mere outgrowths of human form or creativity, but are a population unto themselves.

Technologies Reproduce

If one entertains the idea that technologies behave as distinct populations, how do they possess behaviours similar to life forms ; how are their characteristics indicative of living species[8] ? We can recognize that the demand for technologies to ingest electrical energy is similar to the demand for living forms to ingest food. As a result they also produce waste products : radioactive wastes, toner cartridges, carbon monoxide fumes, etc. However, the work of some electronic artists suggests that technologies have gone as far as mimicking the advanced species-specific behaviour of reproduction. In 1988 Canadian artists Norman WHITE and Laura KIKAUKA presented *Them Fuckin' Robots* to an audience who watched two separately created two robots have intercourse. WHITE stated :

Laura KIKAUKA and I each built an electromechanical sex machine (hers, female ; mine, male)... We then brought these two machines together for a public performance. The male machine responds to the magnetic fields generated by the female circuits, thereby increasing its rate of breathing and moving its limbs, simultaneously charging a capacitor to electric « orgasm »[9].

Related to their reproductive potential, technologies possess species-indicative population patterns, evidenced through their manufacturing and evolutionary cycles. From the assumption that technologies are created to mimic human behaviour, and, given the knowledge that populations function inter-dependently, ecologically-based population statistics may one day seriously involve studying the human/technology inter-species relationship.

New York based artist Perry HOBERMAN has created a work suggesting the theme of the accumulative population densities of technologies. *Faraday's Garden* (1993) involves an impressive array of domestic and office appliances that are electronically linked to the footpath of participants. As one proceeds into the electronic garden, the weight of each step triggers the switches of the appliances on the surrounding shelves. The substantial number of technologies used in this piece, ranging from slide and film projectors to can openers, blenders, clocks and radios, whir with activity aside each participant. Perry HOBERMAN says, « Our appliances are coveted and exploited when new, discarded and forgotten when obsolete. We maintain a kind of amnesia about these machines as each is replaced by newer, more effective models[10]. »